

## Ethics and an Ecological View of Health

Several recent conferences have emphasised profound links between human health and the science of ecology (generally defined as the study of relationships between organisms and other living and nonliving things). They represent a movement towards greater interaction between these disciplines. In this article I will suggest that the bioethics profession can make an important contribution to this initiative. In turn, this might help to embed health ethics in the public consciousness.

### Natural Relations?

The links between health and human activities that affect the physical world have been a common concern of environmentalism since the 1960s. Environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have effectively exploited the rhetorical power of health concerns associated with issues such as radioactive waste, pollution, genetically modified organisms, ozone depletion, climate change and nature conservation. Phrases such as 'ecosystem health', 'healthy biosphere' and 'the health of the planet' have become common in environmental debates. Activities that are seen to threaten health have often been implicitly characterised as unethical. The origins of this perception reside in the related notions that health (in the sense of well-being of body and mind) is a fundamental value, and ethical actions respect such values. However, this link is not straightforward. Too often environmental debates, particularly in the media, ignore the fact that our common-sense understanding of such concepts as nature and health are value laden, not objectively defined. The meaning of nature has been discussed extensively by environmental philosophers, but health remains largely unexplored in an ecological context. For example, our notions of what it is to be 'healthy' in the context of humans might be extended relatively easily to some non-human animals, but it must be re-evaluated in the context of non-living phenomena such as ecosystems (which are subjective entities themselves). That health, in an ecological context, is a value-based notion with its own assumptions is often forgotten in the politics of environmentalism. But it should come as no surprise to bioethicists. Unfortunately, despite the primacy given to health concerns in many environmental debates, their input is often inconspicuous.



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### Professional Priorities

The International Association of Bioethics (IAB) describes the discipline as "the study of ethical, social, legal, philosophical and other related issues in health care and in the biological sciences" (1). The Environmental Bioethics interest group within the IAB concentrates more explicitly on 'topics at the intersection of ethics, health and ecology' (2). Yet it is not clear that bioethicists share a consensus on the relevance of environmental matters to their work. Not infrequently, bioethicists address medical matters as though these were disconnected from

wider ecological concerns. On this basis, it is perhaps no wonder that bioethics discussions appear to be poorly developed in most environmental debates. Of course, not all health ethicists would make good environmental ethicists, or vice versa. Some dilemmas are a product of social conventions and structures, while others are linked to what ecologists call ecosystem processes- interactions between living and non-living things that seem to be essential for life. Each area demands the attention of those with appropriate expertise. With the skills they already possess, however, bioethicists with even a basic understanding of ecological principles can make an important contribution to discussions involving health and the environment.

## **Partnership at Work**

The formation in 1994 of the International Society for Ecosystem Health (ISEH) represents one attempt to build bridges in the public consciousness between ecology and health. The organisation's mission, "to encourage the understanding of the critical linkages between human activity, ecological change and health," encapsulates the view that healthy ecosystems promote healthy people, (the theme of the Society's 2002 conference in Washington DC). Also in 2002, Bioethics, Environment and Population was a topic at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences in Montreal. The Provincial Health Ethics Network integrated links between health and the environment in Bioethics Week, 2003. Also in 2003, the University of Montreal hosted the International Forum on Ecosystem Approaches to Human Health. These are just some of the events that reflect a growing interest in linking environmental conditions and health using ecological ideas. What might bioethicists have to offer this movement? Working groups at the ISEH conference looked at the impacts on public health of land use changes (such as deforestation and agricultural development), wildlife use, emergent diseases and the use of geological resources. These issues operate largely at the government or corporation level. Yet individuals are increasingly asked to make informed decisions about them through consultation or the democratic process. Such decisions require recognition of, among other things, the subjective biases that influence the value placed upon health compared with other concerns, the relative value of different entities to which health, in some sense, is important, and even an understanding of what health means. These are familiar issues for bioethicists. Moreover, because bioethicists are often trained to operate at the clinical level, they are used to dealing with people on a very sensitive, personal, level. This experience might make them highly effective negotiators in environmental debates, in which members of the general public often invest deeply personal emotions. Of course, more activist bioethicists might choose to advocate for the primacy of health concerns. The best ones should, at the very least, encourage a more comprehensive debate about definitions of health in an ecological context.

## **Value Added**

It is unfortunate that many health ethics organisations have difficulty capturing public attention, because people in all walks of life experience health issues entailing an ethical dilemma. Attempts by organisations such as ISEH and PHEN to link health, the environment and community are an excellent way to increase awareness if they are widely promoted and have elements that appeal to a general audience. However, demystifying bioethics is essential if this is to succeed. For example, marketing of some bioethics events might do well to emphasise the "bio", providing core principles are not compromised. Biology, in the context both of humans and nonhuman nature, has strong appeal to people. Most people have no formal ethics training, yet they make ethical decisions everyday. If many do not recognise that these are often bioethical, it is only because bioethics has not become as entrenched as the environment in the public consciousness. If bioethicists make inroads into this territory, they can help to clarify the values underlying human perceptions of the relationship between health and the environment. In the process they might also increase public understanding of a wider range of health-related ethical dilemmas - including those associated with a clinical setting, the bioethicist's traditional domain.