Cross-Cultural Health Ethics in Resource-Poor Settings

“. . . the first step would be to try separating the kernel of Western science and technology from its Western packaging – the entire value system, assumptions, expectations, propaganda, and evangelical spirit surrounding it . . . When you are offered a meal, you do not take the dishes with you after eating the food.”

- Godfrey Tangwa (bioethicist from Cameroon)

A. Scenarios

1) You are participating in an elective at a small community hospital in rural Malawi after your third year of medical school. Soon after your arrival, the medical director asks if you would perform cesarean sections, since the physician who usually does surgery is away for two weeks. He has a 3-page outline of the operation and assures you that the highly experienced scrub nurses will guide you through each step of the procedure. He says that other medical students from the U.S. have often taken on the task without major problems.

2) It is your second day of a month-long elective at a rural clinic in Bangladesh. A 4-year old boy with a severe hemorrhagic disease (unknown etiology) has anemia that has progressively worsened to the point where it is clear that he will die soon. There is no blood bank accessible in reasonable time, and there are many superstitions and taboos in the village about body fluids and blood transfusions. You realize that you have the same blood type as the boy, and know that your blood would be relatively safe. However, the local physician you are working with says the boy would likely die even after a transfusion, and cautions you about the possible negative reaction of the community and family if you, as an outsider, were to offer your own blood . . .

B. Theoretical Components of an Ethical Dilemma in a Resource-Poor Setting

- **Dilemma** = a difficult decision that will determine whether or not an individual (or group) should proceed with an intended or proposed health action when the balance between all possible benefits and harms of the action is unclear or is disputed.
- **Context** = the socioeconomic, cultural, and political situation in which the dilemma arises.
- **Players** = the individuals, groups, communities, institutions, or governments that have a role or an interest in the resolution of the dilemma. It is the dynamic relationships among the various players that characterize ethical dilemmas. In resource-poor settings, ethical dilemmas are frequently compounded by power imbalances among the players.
- **Ethics** = the philosophical framework or theory that can be used to facilitate the discussion and decision-making process that leads to the resolution of the dilemma. The “moral map” that is chosen may be based on the principles of Western bioethics (i.e., autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, justice), a human rights model, international law, religious faith, etc..
- **Resolution** = the outcome of the ethical analysis, and implementation of a plan.
- **Reflection** = evaluation of the short-term and long-term, as well as local and global, effects of the chosen manner by which the dilemma was resolved.

C. Tips for Applying Ethical Analysis in Global Health

- **Before you go . . .**
  1. Be pro-active in your approach to ethical analysis. Try to predict ethical dilemmas before going overseas.
  2. Understand the context in which you will be working, and the ‘players’ with whom you will be working.
  3. Choose your partners carefully, and be certain you have consistent and realistic objectives and expectations.

- **When you are there . . .**
  4. Do no harm
  5. Effective communication and cultural sensitivity are keys to dilemma resolution.
  6. Most situations are not emergencies. There is almost always time for discussion and deliberation.
  7. Do not expect a clear answer. Often, the benefit of ethical analysis is in the process of discussion itself.
  8. Be wary of a clear answer. If the answer seems too ‘obvious’, consider the possibility that you have neglected a certain player or contextual factor.
  9. Be honest with yourself about your own dual motives. Be realistic about your own limitations.
  10. Critically question others’ motives, but also demonstrate open-mindedness and respect.

- **After you return home . . .**
  11. ‘Reflection’ is perhaps the most important step. Share your experiences with others.