

## Paediatric Bioethics in Hong Kong: Now and Then

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### Abstract

Although the field of Paediatrics is well established in Hong Kong with its own College and qualification examinations, the development of paediatric bioethics has been rather slow. With the establishment of several Bioethics Centres in academic institutes in Hong Kong, it is hoped that more momentum can be achieved in this important field.

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Bioethics, by definition, is the study of morality, that is the study of right or wrong. In some persons' view, bioethics is the study of life. The view and opinion of a man or woman to various issues in life can be much different. This can be related to one's upbringing, cultural and religious beliefs. For example, if your friend has a pregnancy with antenatal diagnosis of cleft lip. would you advise the anxious parents to continue on with the pregnancy and give them your psychological support or you would advise the parents to allow the mother to perform termination of pregnancy (abortion). With the advent of sophisticated antenatal diagnostic tools such as real life ultrasound and maternal blood taking for foetal chromosomal analysis, many foetus who have major or minor congenital abnormalities can be detected before birth and the management of such pregnancies may present a difficult problem for the clinicians. I have seen parents who strongly request to have termination of pregnancy for minor congenital abnormalities such as small renal cystic dilatation. It is well known that the cyst may resolve after birth with no permanent damage to the kidney. On the other hand, I have also seen parents with foetus of Patau's syndrome who wish to continue the pregnancy till term and touch their baby after birth. It is felt that each case should be assessed individually and the management should be individualized. In Hong Kong, with the establishment of Central Clinical Ethics Committee in the Hospital Authority Head Office, Clinical Ethics Committees are set up in various clusters hospitals in the early 2000s. The membership of the Cluster Clinical Ethics Committee include hospital administrators, senior clinicians, nurses, pastoral care workers, religious representatives and community leaders. Because of lack of expertise and resource, the focus of the Committee is mainly on the ethical approval of clinical researches and little effort is put to discussion of difficult clinical scenerios. In that period, a professor of clinical ethics was appointed in University of Hong Kong and gave expert opinion in cases with difficult ethical dilemmas. However, the post was later abolished and little progress in that aspect had been made so far.

Withholding of live support for newborns and children had been a topic of major discussion in Hong Kong and the Central Ethics Committee had published a Guideline to help clinicians to make such decisions [1]. Euthanasia is legally not acceptable in Hong Kong and withdrawal of life support has been carried out in patient whose treatment is futile. Another hot issue is the resource allocation of public money to treat rare disease with expensive drug treatment. This issue is causing much media attention in Hong Kong and it is hoped that the Government will review its health policy towards this controversial issue soon. The recent issue on genomic editing is attracting much local discussion in both the academic field and public as well.

With the establishment of various Bioethics Centres in Hong Kong in recent years, there is much more academic and public discussion on the ethical issues in neonates and paediatrics. Numerous forums have been held with local and overseas speakers. In my Centre, several research projects have been initiated such as interactive education program for secondary school students on suicide and depression, analysis of unwanted single mother, opinion survey on young people's attitude to genomic editing and SARS ethics. It is hoped that with more public resource and collaboration between local and overseas parties interested in the field, there is more growth in this fascinating area in the next decade.

### **Conflict of Interest**

Nil.

### **Bibliography**

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