

The Olivieri symposium

Commentary on the Olivieri symposium

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The Canadian Bioethics Society has taken some constructive steps in its attempt to learn from the Olivieri case

We would like to thank the authors and editors of the JME's minisymposium on the Olivieri case in the February 2004 issue of the journal for continuing and extending the dialogue about this important challenge to the North American bioethics community.

This minisymposium is of special interest to us as members of the Canadian Bioethics Society's (CBS) working group on employment standards for bioethics. We are members of this working group precisely because we believe that most of us in the Canadian bioethics community ought to do more to respond to situations such as the Olivieri/Apotex affair. We welcome the opportunity to continue to learn from the case and to strengthen our Canadian community of bioethicists.

Our working group came into being as a formal body at the 1999 annual meeting of the CBS when a motion was passed establishing the working group on employment standards for bioethics. The purpose of the working group was, and is, to examine the issues of ethicists' roles and responsibilities and the environment in which ethicists, particularly those practising in a non-tenured environment, work. We have been endeavouring to grapple with a number of the kinds of issues raised in the minisymposium, including accountability on the part of both bioethicists and the organisations employing them; standards of practice in bioethics; protection for whistleblowers; and how to respond to problems inherent in the moral climate of the organisations in which we work.

Among our undertakings to date are:

- a draft discussion paper on working conditions for bioethics in Canada
- a model code of ethics for bioethics
- workshops, panels, or discussions at the CBS's annual meetings in 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002
- an essay prize "to encourage junior scholars to engage in scholarly work related to working conditions in bioethics; professionalism in or the professionalisation of bioethics; or the social role of bioethics".

The working group's current works in progress include:

- a qualitative study of conflicts of interest among bioethicists
- a working paper on various models of workplace dispute resolution
- a "model contract" for clinical ethics consultants
- a framework for a peer support network.

A record of our work on these issues can be found on the CBS's website, at www.bioethics.ca/

We know that no one aspect of our work to date constitutes a panacea. It is likely that no draft document or peer support network could have averted the Olivieri debacle. But we remain committed to the ideal that this work is of value, and that ongoing discussion and open and frank self-examination is crucial.

The JME's minisymposium reminds us that we have a great deal still to do, and that this kind of work is urgently

needed. We can ignore all of these matters (because crises happen but rarely in any individual's working life) but we do so at our peril. The publication of the JME minisymposium is a milestone—a wake up call for all of us working in bioethics. We applaud the JME's attention to this crucial issue, and invite the bioethics community and its many stakeholders to join us in our continuing attempts to grapple with this difficult issue in a constructive way.

Finally, we recognise the need for healing in the bioethics community, and suggest that this healing will require collegiality and constructive moves in the direction of reconciliation. Only in this way will bioethics be strengthened as a community, and left more capable of responding to cases like the Olivieri case in the future.

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The authors wish to make it clear that they are not speaking as representatives of the Canadian Bioethics Society. The views expressed here are their own.

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