

## STUDENTS' CORNER

### Little sparks: The NBC experience

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When I heard that I'd have the honour of attending the National Bioethics Conference in Pune in 2017, to which I was sent by the Health and Humanities Division of St. John's, I really didn't know what to expect. Being in my second year of MBBS then, I'd only ever "attended" conferences as a volunteer—sitting at the registration desk and handing out eagerly awaited participation certificates, delivering flowers and uttering myriad pleasantries to the dignitaries, guiding people to sessions—and the like. Apart from the fact that I'd be an actual registered delegate at this conference, and the fact that I'd be there as a presenter, another thing that was hard for me to come to terms with was that the NBC would not be a "medical" conference.

The excitement set in when I began to receive e-mails from the organisers about the agenda and the objectives of the conference. The fact that I was always addressed as Dr Aiswarya Sasi, a title I still had a few years left to earn, might also have contributed. As I cursorily glanced through the participants' list, I marveled at the sight of lawyers, teachers, philosophers and people across a wide spectrum of career paths.

On the first day of the conference, I felt like I'd entered a whole other world. Not only was there a literal change in the winds, but figuratively too, I felt the winds of change as I escaped the sheer monotony of routine. I stood beside my poster (1), the result of month after month of data collection and analysis. Some of the questions I was asked by the people who came to see it really did intrigue me. Even after having gone over my data a sizeable number of times, my eyes were opened to new facets that hadn't quite occurred to me. This was my favourite part of the conference, because it was at this moment that I was struck by the importance of being open-minded and having a versatile audience who will never fail to stimulate you.

The theme of the Conference was "Healing and dying with dignity: Ethical issues in palliative care, end-of-life care and euthanasia". I thoroughly enjoyed every session that I attended.

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In the workshop chaired by Dr Olinda Timms on developing an ethics training module for health-professionals in end-of-life situations, I was appointed the scribe of my group. The group consisted of a nursing student, a practising doctor, a religious Father and a woman whose father had actually been in such an end-of-life situation. The only other place I've ever discussed issues like these before this, was in the ethics classes we used to have in our first year of college, where sixty medical students interacted with a few doctors, who took these classes. While those sessions were a wonderful start to "thinking ethics," this workshop gave me a bird's eye-view of the entire situation from all possible points of view. The other sessions I attended were those on integrity, ethics and professionalism, ethics in clinical care and all the plenaries. For those three days, I was a sponge, trying my level best to absorb as much as I could from as many people as possible.

Apart from the formal sessions, I learned almost as much from the informal ones as well. The tea breaks, dinner sessions and our rooms were all opportunities to discover new people and find out what magical things they were doing with their lives. I think one of the things I appreciated most about this conference, as silly as it may sound, is that I felt like I had a voice. At purely medical conferences with complicated procedures, terminology, and advancements being brought to the fore, as a medical student I never really had anything to say. In stark contrast, when people talked to me at the NBC, they didn't talk to me as a nineteen-year-old medical student who happened to be the youngest and least experienced delegate among them; but as somebody who had an opinion. Nobody is too small or too inexperienced to discuss ethics, because it is literally at the heart of the human ethos — this was another of my learnings.

All in all, the entire conference, in all its dimensions, was certainly an eye-opener for me. I've always had a soft corner for the Humanities, and this experience really has heightened that. I also strongly believe that every medical professional should attend at least one such conference, to catch a glimpse of the overwhelmingly expansive world that exists beyond the elite nook of Medicine, if not for anything else.

#### Reference

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