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| **7th Punjab Bioethics group meeting**  Shalamar Medical & Dental College, Lahore  Friday, Jan 7th 2021 |

# **Call to order**

The 7th meeting of **Punjab Bioethics Group** was held virtually at **Shalamar Medical & Dental College, Lahore** on Friday, Jan 7th 2021. The meeting was moderated by Dr. Saadia Shahzad and lasted one and a half hour ; & was attended by the following professionals from various institutes of Punjab.

**Attendees included:**

Prof. M. Zahid Bashir Dr. Mustafa Aslam

Dr. Sarosh Saleem Dr. Saadia Shahzad

Dr. Raja Sajjad Haider Dr. Mumtaz Lakhani

Prof. Aamir Bashir Dr. Kanza Babar

Nasim Tariq Romeeza

Prof. Shabbir Bhatti Iqra Masood

Humaira Mobeen Tariq Aziz

Dr. Annum Ishtiaq Prof. Adeela Shahid

Dr. Ambreen Khalid Dr. FarkhandaGafoor

Dr. Nuzhat Irfan Malik Noor ul ain Waqar

Dr. Muhammad Kashif Dr. Javeria

Miss Uzma Miss Razia

Miss Anam Miss Saba Shahid

Regrets:

Some of the PBG members were not present online, though no regrets were intimated to us prior to the meeting.

# **Agenda of meeting**

Two cases were discussed. The participants engaged in a discussion with enthusiasm.

Case 1: prolonging life or prolonging death?

Case 2: Mandatory pre-marital screening of thalassemia minor- What are the ethical and legal implications?

# **Meeting minutes**

Case 1: The first case was shared by Dr. Mumtaz Lakhani. The case was regarding a one year old young boy with hydrocephalus; with a blocked shunt. Looking at his delayed mile stones physician was of the opinion that he will have a totally dependent life. Putting him on ventilator was a difficult decision which the physician had to take and for how long?

Several questions were raised by Dr. Lakhani including, what is the ethical responsibility of physicians and parents when the prognosis of child isn’t clear. The parents are stakeholders who have a legal authority to make decisions. The ethical principles and socio-cultural values of the family came into discussion. In a situation where prognosis is not clear and child is already suffering from disabilities, parents’ decision to continue life support may be seen as prolonging death rather than prolonging life. However, the value of this life to the family and family members must also be considered. A point regarding limitation of available beds/ventilators was also raised. Another argument was raised that since beds/ventilators are a constantly limited resource, at least in Pakistan, the focus must remain on the patient and care being offered. In the same context, what we mean by suffering and how we subjectively define a life “worth living” was also discussed. In the end, it was concluded that each case in clinical ethics requires deliberation by health care providers and ethicists in terms of the relevant contextual factors. Hospitals should have clear and fair policies and ethics committee members should be involved early on to give the recommendations. Communication must be clear, honest and free of biases, while family’s wishes and values must be considered. Hospitals should also work on improving palliative care resources.

Case 2: The ethical issue was discussed in the context of the mandatory Thalassemia testing Act in Pakistan by Dr. saadia Shahzad. Following questions were raised by her:

* What ethical/legal concerns will be there if two thalassemia minor persons want to get married and have children?
* What are the challenges of implementing such a law in only one or two provinces of Pakistan?
* How does the law respond to abortion/termination of pregnancy, that is often suggested to parents by their physicians, in Pakistan?

Dr. Mustafa Aslam and Prof. Dr. Zahid Bashir gave an overview of the present law in Sindh and a possibly upcoming law in Punjab/Federal. Some worthwhile discussion was generated around these laws and implications of these laws in various parts of Pakistan. The law of abortion in Pakistan that is based on Shariah law also came under discussion. It was discussed that the law in Sindh does not suggest either abortion or prohibiting the two Thalassemia minor persons from getting married. The law rather suggests counseling of the couple and the family. An objection was raised against the law being just suggestive in nature and limited to only one province. A similar law already implemented in Iran also came under discussions which lead to criticism of abortion in such cases as this would be in contradiction to the already existing abortion law in Pakistan. The purpose of having a law that only suggests thalassemia minor person to not get married was also criticized. However, it was agreed upon by most of the participants that this is a grave issue and probably the aim is to develop awareness among general public so as to reduce the burden of this disease. The discussion finished on a positive note that substantive efforts are required by not only health care providers abuts also lawmakers in Pakistan to create awareness.

Everyone appreciated the healthy discussion on the two cases and particularly discussion on legal points as health care providers in Pakistan are generally not aware of the medical laws. Dr. Saadia thanked all the participants for their presence and engagement.

**Suggestions:**

Participants were encouraged to bring ethical issues to the discussion table without any hesitation.

**Announcement:**

Bioethics Department, SMDC is offering a one year Post-graduate Diploma in Healthcare Ethics & Professionalism. Flyer for the induction of the second batch is out. The degree will be awarded by University of Health Sciences (UHS). For details, please visit: <https://smdc.edu.pk/admissions-dhep/>

**Adjournment:**

Meeting was adjourned by the moderator Dr. Saadia Shahzad with thanks to all attendees for support and encouragement. The date and timing of the next meeting were decided as 4thMarch 2022, at 9:30am (online).

**Minutes recorded by:**

Saadia Shahzad

Sarosh Saleem