



BSc Bioethics student-led conference, 2019

Personal Beliefs within Medicine

With great thanks to the following funders:
Institute of Medical Ethics and University of Bristol Widening Participation

31 attendees: 12 University of Bristol BSc Bioethics students, 2 University of West England Nursing students; 8 pupils from South Dartmoor Community College; 9 academics.

The central theme of the conference was personal beliefs in medicine, with discussion about the role of religion in medicine, personal beliefs in abortion services and related bioethics research, and differences between beliefs held by healthcare providers and the public. There was also an opportunity for students of the BSc Bioethics to showcase their work by presenting their dissertation topics, and for pupils from South Dartmoor Community College to get a taster of university learning, and the discipline of bioethics.

Professor Alastair Campbell opened the day with a talk about the role of religion in medicine and medical ethics, asking whether religion was 'Janus faced'. Prof Campbell explored the benefits and pitfalls of incorporating religious reasoning into decision making, and explored examples of how it can be used well and not so well. Discussion centred on the challenges of responding to 'intransigence' that is motivated by firm religious commitment, and the importance of respecting autonomy. The discussion also touched upon whether we have an obligation to treat all 'reason' equally seriously and be respectful of beliefs and reasons that we might think are not worthy of respect. This discussion set us up nicely for a later discussion about parents, children and vaccination.

Prof Sally Sheldon gave a presentation about personal belief and abortion services, in which she talked about her ARHC project on a Biography of the Abortion Act. She explored the roles of the individuals who shaped the ACT and the personal beliefs that drove them. Prof Sheldon also recounted her experiences working on a controversial topic in the public eye and the ways that personal beliefs of both critics and supporters can shape the way the work is perceived. The talk generated much discussion, including questions about professional bravery and compassion (both connected to personal beliefs) and about the role of historical research methods on bioethics scholarship.

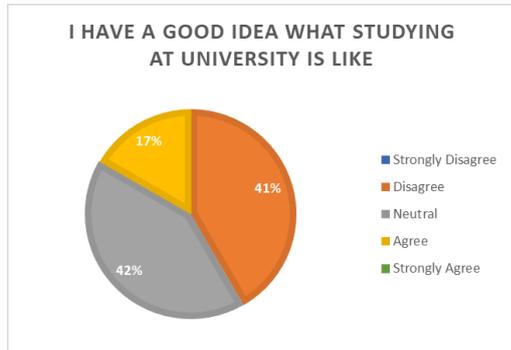
Prof Richard Huxtable gave a talk that explored personal belief in relation to childhood vaccination, and challenged the audience to consider and respond to a series of cases in which the personal beliefs of parents differed from the professional beliefs of medical professionals around the safety, efficacy and morality of vaccination. The audience was invited to vote on key questions about the cases, and encouraged to provide reasons for their voting, which generated much discussion. Topics for discussion and questions included the appropriateness of ranking different kinds of belief systems (is there a hierarchy of reasons?), the moral imperative to respect beliefs that differ from one's own, and the question of what it means to be 'respectful' of a belief.

Students of the BSc Bioethics delivered 'elevator pitches' in which they gave brief presentations on their dissertation topics. These included female genital cutting and male circumcision, vaccination, fathers' rights concerning the unborn child, gene editing,

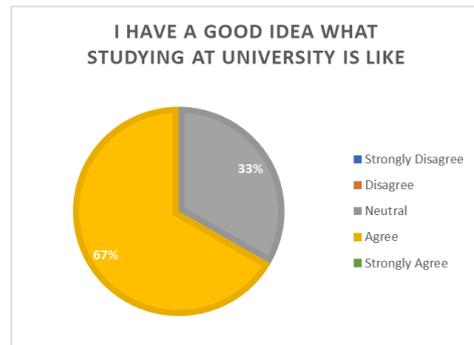
conscientious refusals in healthcare; overseas travel for experimental treatment for children; access to IVF; dignity; termination of pregnancy; and human enhancement.

Throughout the day, the school pupils were encouraged to join the discussions, which took place during talks, in Q&A, and informally over coffee and lunch. The pupils were very engaged, and made valuable contributions to the discussion. Feedback indicates they also benefited greatly from the conference, learning more about university-level study, and about bioethics in particular, as the following charts show:

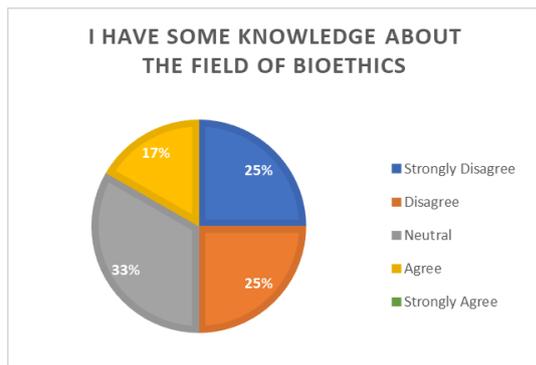
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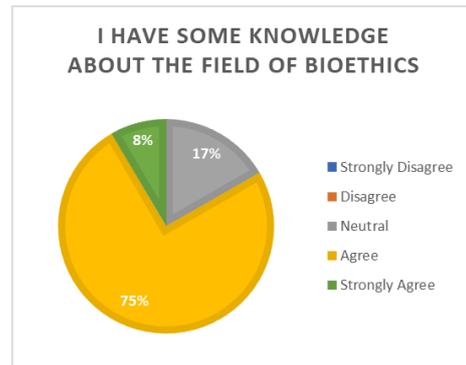
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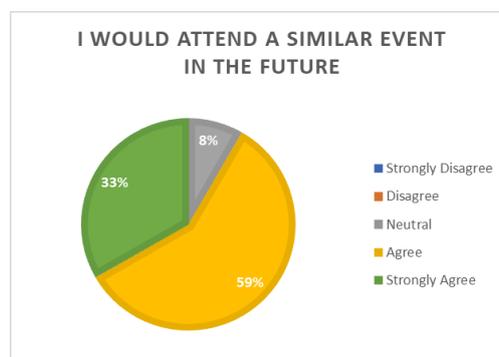
Before the start of the conference:



After attending the conference:



After attending the conference:



Overall, the conference was a great success. Certainly, it was a very enjoyable day and a fantastic opportunity for medical students, nursing students and school pupils to share ideas and learn from one another in an inclusive setting.