

## “Very Big, Very Exciting, Slightly Scary:” An Interview with CBHD President Dr. Andrew Fergusson

Sarah J. Flashing, M.A., Director of Communications

CBHD President and CEO, Dr. Andrew Fergusson, talks about his years of experience in medicine and bioethics, here and abroad, in an interview with Sarah J. Flashing, Director of Communications.

**SJF: What is your impression of the American bioethics arena?**

AF: Very big, very exciting, slightly scary.

**SJF: How do American and British bioethics compare?**

AF: Let me break that up into three categories: taking life, making life, and faking life. On the traditional ‘taking life’ issues, we are about equal on abortion statistics but the US is much more polarized on the politics. Abortion is a big political issue here; it isn’t yet in the UK. On euthanasia, and notwithstanding Oregon, the UK is in imminent danger of being well ahead of the US. There was a Parliamentary debate on October 10 and in November we saw launched a new legislative attempt to introduce Oregon-style physician assisted suicide in the UK. This has a real chance of going through.

In ‘making life’ Britain is legislatively ahead on artificial reproductive technologies but I am sure there are forces in the US who would like to catch up. ‘Faking life’ through artificial intelligence, robotics, etc., is ahead in the US because of the financial investment required and because Americans are already more sold on enhancement.

And of course, the whole of bioethics is rapidly succumbing to globalization so we could expect these differences progressively to disappear.

**SJF: What is your particular area of expertise in the field?**

AF: In the early 1990s I got into the British euthanasia debate and so I suppose I have specialized in end-of-life issues. How did I get into that? In March 1990 I was flicking through my copy of the British family physicians’ journal, and almost missed an article about resources, the elderly, and euthanasia. When I realized what the title said I read it carefully. I was appalled (the euthanasia proposed was not even voluntary!) and I immediately telephoned the journal’s



editorial office to find out about deadlines for letters, could I write an article in reply, etc. I finished by saying “But of course there’s no point in me doing anything, because you must have had lots of responses in by now.” There was a long silence and then the editor said “Well actually we did think it was pretty controversial but in the last month we haven’t heard from anybody until you today.” That did it. God kind of said to me there and then: you do it. So I wrote a strong letter that got published, was invited to join a new coalition

Nigel Cameron was setting up, and the rest, as they say, is history.

**SJF: What, in general, do you regard as the most urgent area of concern in bioethics today?**

AF: It’s really hard to split the issues up! I think we have to keep working to stop the killing we are already doing as well as working to stop any new ways of killing people. I think we also have to respond to the ever-growing assaults on human dignity. As a former family physician I think the just delivery of healthcare is a major ethical issue.

**SJF: In the next decade, what do you believe will be the most pressing issues?**

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AF: A former British prime minister was once asked what he most feared in politics. His famous reply was “Events, my dear boy, events.” In other words, we never know what developments might occur, and the pace of biotech development is just awesome. The most pressing issue will be the continued pursuit toward unfettered science. I fear unfettered science; I fear bioethics without boundaries.

**SJF: What role, if any, do you believe the Bible plays in engaging bioethics in the public square?**

AF: Half way through my medical training I chose to become a committed Christian because I was overwhelmed by the weight of the evidence. The Bible gives us the best account of the way the world is, and of the strengths and weaknesses of human beings. That account remains true and so, for example, the Bible’s foundational principles about humans being made in the image of God and their consequent dignity and responsibilities are enormously important.

**SJF: What role should the church play in bioethics today?**

AF: Bioethics is the quintessentially multidisciplinary subject and so theologians must join moral philosophers, health professionals, scientists, lawyers, and all, in the debates. Ordinary church members have a duty to be adequately up-to-speed so their pastors and teachers need basic material at the appropriate level. That’s where CBHD can help to educate and equip. The church should model Good Samaritan neighbor care that recognizes human dignity. And, perhaps above all, the church should pray—God is bigger than bioethics and nothing is impossible with him.

**SJF: What person has had the most influence in your professional life and why?**

AF: That’s another really hard question! My heroes list would include C.S. Lewis, Bob Dylan, the whole range of classic detective fiction writers (not least G. K. Chesterton), and amongst many others Jesus Christ would be way out in front. Alternatively, the answer is my wife Catrin, without whom I could not have done anything these last thirty years.

**SJF: What do you hope for the Center to accomplish in the next decade?**

AF: Grow. Change America. Change the world. Bring bioethics within boundaries all of society can recognize and welcome.

**SJF: To you, what is the most interesting aspect of American culture and why?**

AF: I think it would have to be the ‘can do’ spirit. It’s young here, and very exciting in that people believe they personally can advance and so can the nation. But of course there’s a downside to that if we don’t have widespread discussion and consensus about limits. So your biggest plus point can also be a minus!

**SJF: What do you think about American fast food?**

AF: Supersize me! No, please don’t. Seriously, American fast food is better cooked, better served, and better priced than in Britain. But I prefer slow food and slow fellowship around the table. I was fascinated to read in the *Chicago Tribune* recently that families are starting to rediscover all the benefits of having meals together. In a fast moving world that needs time out to review its values, I am reminded that Jesus did much of his teaching around the meal table.

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## Center News

Sarah Flashing, M.A.  
Director of Communications  
The Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity

### CBHD President on Milwaukee PBS Program

CBHD President Dr. Andrew Fergusson appeared on the Milwaukee PBS program *4th Street Forum*, recorded on October 20. This episode, "A Death of One's Own," focused on end-of-life decisions and the controversies surrounding the Terri Schiavo case. This was the third of a four-part series entitled "America's Storm," moderated by Jack Murtaugh. Other panelists included Tracey Humbert, M.D., Clinical Instructor, General Internal Medicine & Palliative Care, Medical College of WI; Father Andrew Nelson, Prof., St. Francis Seminary, Hospital Chaplain, Assistant Priest—St. Paul's Parish; and Thomas Potter, JD, Milwaukee County Assistant DA.. For more information on how to obtain a copy of this episode or entire video series, contact Sarah Flashing at 847.317.4097 or by email at sarah@cbhd.org.

### CBHD Welcomes New Staff Member

The Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity is pleased to announce that Emmanuel Parakati has joined the staff as Director of Business Operations. With Master's degrees in Education and Business, he brings to the position a wealth of professional experience and a passion for the Center's mission. Emmanuel is married to Rajini, a molecular biologist at Northwestern University.

The Center says goodbye to Regional Conference Manager, Betsy Babcock. Betsy has recently accepted a ministry position with North Suburban Evangelical Free Church in Deerfield, IL. We wish Betsy much joy and success in her work.

### 13th Annual Summer Bioethics Conference

*Neuroethics: The New Frontier* is the title of the 2006 Summer bioethics conference. This conference will focus on where the science and clinical implications of "neuroethics" are now and where they are headed and will include speakers such as William Cheshire, Jarret Richardson, Thomas Pellegrino, Cindy Province. Institutes and Seminars will include leaders such as William Cheshire, Dennis Hollinger, Joyce Shelton, E. David Cook, John Kilner, and David Fletcher.

Conference - July 13-15  
Pre-conference Institutes - July 10-13  
Post-conference Seminars - July 17-19.

Please check [www.cbhd.org](http://www.cbhd.org) for more information as it becomes available.

### Hype vs. Fact: An Internet Resource

When it comes to stem cell research, political hype is often substituted for scientific facts. *Do No Harm: The Coalition of Americans for Research Ethics* is a partnership of researchers, bioethicists, academics, and others devoted to informing the public of the ethics and science of stem cell research. The centerpiece of the Coalition's efforts is the Do No Harm website, [www.stemcellresearch.org](http://www.stemcellresearch.org), maintained by CBHD. One featured section is "The 'Political Science' of Stem Cells," a series of one-page 'lessons' that counters hype with scientific fact.

### SJF: Tell me about how your interest in medical ethics developed.

AF: In the early 1980s I was an ordinary working family physician but had recently joined the Christian Medical Fellowship (the UK equivalent of CMDA) and was starting to relate biblical principles to medical ethics questions. I discovered I was quite good at it and I really enjoyed it. Then I began being asked to do talks in churches, and I realized there was a further layer of translation required to get both the medical facts and the Christian concepts across to lay audiences. I discovered I enjoyed that even more, and a few years later when my predecessor at CMF was coming up to retirement, I realized there was a job coming available that was tailor made for me. Or more correctly, I was being tailor made for that job.

Since then I've carried on developing that translation and interpretation role, and in the UK have been christened "the soundbite king." Soundbites—the fast food of communication—are a necessary evil in our culture and I am comfortable with that title, though in defense would point out that any seven second soundbite must be capable of being developed for seven hours if necessary. I therefore like to say I now do "joined up soundbites." More seriously, CBHD exists to do the research and analysis necessary to produce both the media soundbites and the solid academic defenses. Since the best method of defense is attack, CBHD is going to be even more proactive in its commitment to engage. **CBHD**

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## Select Articles at CBHD.com

**Derrick L. Hassert, Ph.D.**, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Trinity Christian College, examines the ethical questions about the nature of personhood after trauma, stroke, or disease in **Still in the Image of God? The Ethical Challenge of Brain Damaged Persons.**

([http://www.cbhd.org/resources/bioethics/hassert\\_2005-09-22.htm](http://www.cbhd.org/resources/bioethics/hassert_2005-09-22.htm))



**Press Release: Statement on Recent Development in Alternative Methods for Obtaining Pluripotent Stem Cells** Scientific inquiry must begin with ethical principles and operate within moral boundaries.

(<http://www.cbhd.org/media/pr/2005-10-28.htm>)



**Ferdinand D. Yates, Jr., M.D., F.A.A.P.**, Fellow of the Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity, discusses the ethics of using children in clinical trials in **Who Cares for the Children?**

([http://www.cbhd.org/resources/healthcare/yates\\_2005-08-19.htm](http://www.cbhd.org/resources/healthcare/yates_2005-08-19.htm))

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**March 31 - April 1, 2006**

## **Healthcare Allocation**

**Madison, Wisconsin**

Speakers: Andrew Fergusson, John F. Kilner

If you are interested in hosting a conference co-sponsored by The Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity in your area, please contact Jim Moscato at [jmoscato@cbhd.org](mailto:jmoscato@cbhd.org) or see our web site at <http://www.cbhd.org/conferences/regionals/>

### Other Upcoming Conferences

**CMDA National Conference**  
-- **Bioethics Track**  
*June 14-18*  
Irvine, CA

**Neuroethics:**  
**The New Frontier**  
*July 13-15*  
Deerfield, IL

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