

Leaders in Ethics Education: Volnei Garrafa

Volnei Garrafa¹

Published online: 7 September 2015
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Short bio

Volnei Garrafa Graduated in Dentistry from the Catholic University of Porto Alegre Brazil (1965-68). He was awarded the MSc degree in Stomatology/Oral Cancer from the University of São Paulo, Brazil (USP) (1969-70) and the PhD in Sciences from São Paulo State University (UNESP), São Paulo (1971-74). He completed a Postdoctoral Project in Bioethics at La Sapienza University, Rome, Italy (1991-93). He was an assistant lecturer at UNESP (1971-73) and has been a full-time lecturer at the University of Brasília, Brazil (UnB) since 1973 (until today). Currently, he is the Titular Professor of the Department of Public Health of the School of Health Sciences, where he coordinates the UNESCO Chair and the Postgraduate Bioethics Program at specialism, master's and doctoral levels. At UnB, he was previously the Pro-Rector for University Extension (1985-1989). Currently, he is a member of the University Council and of the institution's Governing Board.

In Brazil, his native country, he was previously President of the Brazilian Society of Stomatology (1976-78); Coordinator of the National Program for Prevention and Early Diagnosis of Oral Cancer (1976-79); President of the Teachers' Union of the University of Brasília (1980-82); Founder and first President of the National Forum of Pro-Rectors for Extension of the Brazilian Public Universities (1987-89); President of the Brazilian Center for Health Studies (CEBES) (1994-96); Titular Member of the National Research Ethics Committee of the Brazilian Ministry of Health (1996-2003); Vice-President (1999-2002) and subsequently President of the Brazilian Society of Bioethics (2002-2005). He presided over the Second Brazilian Congress of Bioethics (1998), the Fourth Brazilian Congress of Bioethics / Sixth World Congress of Bioethics (2002), and the Ninth Brazilian Congress of Bioethics (2011).

Internationally, he is currently a member of UNESCO's International Bioethics Committee (IBC) (2010-2017); a member of the Board of Directors of the International Association of Education in Ethics (IAEE) (Pittsburgh, USA, 2013- 2017); and a member of the Scientific Council of the International Society of Bioethics (SIBI)

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(Gijón, Spain). He was the founder and first President of UNESCO's Latin American and Caribbean Bioethics Network (Redbioética) (2003-2010). His published works include 22 books; 92 chapters in compiled books and 210 articles in indexed scientific journals. He has supervised 24 doctoral theses and 22 master's dissertations within bioethics.

You are one of the leaders in global bioethics. Why did you become interested in this area of ethics?

I arrived at the University of Brasília in 1973. From then until 1991, I dedicated myself to the fields of oral pathology/oral cancer and public health. In 1991, I decided to go to Rome, in Italy, to develop a postdoctoral project at La Sapienza University. My ambitious objective was to study “the health-disease process from the conceptual perspective of a world undergoing transformation”, because I was struck both by the pace of scientific and technological development and by the growing socioeconomic disparities that could be seen in that last decade of the twentieth century. On arrival in Italy, I immediately came into contact with bioethics and changed the aim of my research. In other words, my scientific unease became completely channeled into the field of bioethics, within which I felt that I might find, if not answers, then at least alleviation for my strong scientific preoccupations of that time. Since then, and continuing today, I have dedicated myself entirely to bioethics, as a full-time professor at the University of Brasília, in the Federal District of Brazil. This is a public university with free tuition for all undergraduate and postgraduate students, fully funded by the Brazilian State.

Who were the teachers who have inspired you to choose a professional career in bio ethics? What have they learned you?

During the years that I spent at La Sapienza University, in Rome, I worked with Professor Giovanni Berlinguer, who at that time not only was the titular professor of that institution, but also was a senator of the Italian Republic. He was recognized worldwide as a notable public health specialist and had the largest political responsibility for the Italian healthcare reforms of the 1970s. Within that field, he collaborated in the implementation of the Brazilian healthcare reforms of the 1980s, and he is still considered today to be its most important intellectual mentor. When I arrived in Rome, he confessed to me that he had become passionate with bioethics and put forward the idea of changing my original research project to another one, directly related to bioethics. For a few days, I read several texts that he had suggested that I should look at. I immediately became convinced that this was a new path that should be followed, especially because in Brazil bioethics was still at a very early stage. Professor Berlinguer therefore suggested that we should develop a research project on “The human market – a bioethical study on purchases and sales of body parts”. I spent 2 years working hard in the library of the Italian National Health Institute and the final result was several scientific articles and a book that we published together in Italy, Brazil and Portugal. In these studies, we made an intellectual journey from the primitive

market (when people were sold in their entirety, into slavery) to the technological market, which incorporates commercialization of separated parts of the body, going from entire organs down to gametes and cells. Berlinguer was also the president of the Italian Bioethics Committee, as well as being a member of UNESCO's International Bioethics Committee. The things that I learned most from him were the method, combativeness to favor the people who are most needy in this world and the importance of always being scientifically humble.

What is your view of the current status of bioethics?

In the seventh and most recent edition of Tom Beauchamp and James Childress's book "Principles of Biomedical Ethics" (2013), they make the following remark right on the first line of their preface: "Biomedical ethics, or bioethics, was a youthful field ..." (my emphasis). In other words, from the perspective of these two American authors, bioethics (which translates literally as "ethics of life": bios + ethos) can thematically be reduced to the biomedical field. In their view, the root "bio", does not mean "life" but, rather, "biology", which is almost a pleonasm. In Latin America, the main scholars of bioethics do not take this view. The Latin American regional approach to bioethics has had a strong historical relationship with the themes of public health, since its beginnings. However, following the adoption of UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, in Paris, in 2005, which was unanimously approved by the 191 member-countries of UNESCO, the working agenda of bioethics has been expanded from its originally biomedical and biotechnological themes to include health-related themes (the right to healthcare and the right to access to new medications, etc.), social themes (exclusion, racism, illiteracy, etc.) and environmental themes (the right to clean water, preservation of biodiversity, etc.).

I have no doubt that one of the seeds planted with the aim of thematically transforming bioethics in the twenty-first century took root at the Sixth World Congress of Bioethics, which was held in Brasília, in 2002, under the central theme of "Bioethics, Power and Injustice". There were 1400 participants at this event, from 61 countries, and the scientific program of the congress organically encompassed all four of the above mentioned fields: biomedical, sanitary, social and environmental. In a letter that Daniel Wikler sent to me and Leo Pessini, thanking us for organizing the event, he stated the following: "The congress in Brasília has definitively politicized the international bioethics agenda". In other words, the present status of bioethics harmonically and globally incorporates a newly expanded and politicized focus as a field of inter and transdisciplinary nature. This focus has been created so as to contribute towards constructing a better and fairer world, both from an individual and from a collective point of view, and is of both private and, especially, public nature, governed by universal human rights.

How do you assess the development of ethics education over the past decades in your area of work?

I believe that there have been some significant transformations, particularly with regard to the ways in which the subject matter of ethical issues is addressed. The new educational technologies that have come to be included in study curricula over the last

few years have made studying bioethics more dynamic and attractive. Techniques such as discussion of films, interpretation of the content of novels, simulated juries, problems posed theatrically and research projects among groups of students centered on real conflicts, among other examples, have contributed towards achieving more and better participation and effort during discussions, from the students, with concrete positive results. The ease of access to the up-to-date bibliography, through social networks on the internet, should also be mentioned as a highly positive factor that has contributed towards better development of bioethics teaching today.

Can you describe your teaching activities? Who are your students?

I currently coordinate the Postgraduate Bioethics Program of the University of Brasília, with three courses. The simplest of these is the specialism course, which is now in its 17th consecutive year, having been created in 1998. Thirty places are available on this course, which comprises 375 classroom hours and is given every year, from March to December. So far, we have trained approximately 400 specialists through this program. The master's and doctoral programs only started in 2008, even though I had been supervising theses and dissertations on bioethics since 1996, within our interdisciplinary postgraduate program on Health Sciences, of which I was one of the founders. Since August 2008, we have trained approximately 45 masters and 25 doctors through the program. Our doctoral program is developed over a period of 2 to 4 years and the master's program takes 1 to 2 years. We have an annual national public process for selecting students, in which 14 places are offered for the master's program and eight for the doctoral program. These courses are totally free of charge and students without the economic means also receive a scholarship from the Ministry of Education. Our students have come from 16 of the 25 Brazilian states and Federal District and, internationally, we have also received students from Argentina, Colombia, Mozambique and Uruguay. Regarding the basic training of our students, it is very varied but we have especially had students who were physicians, lawyers, philosophers, nurses, anthropologists, biologists, psychologists, journalists, nutritionists, theologians and sociologists. In total, 17 different professions have been represented.

In your view, what are the core objectives of bioethics education?

In the program that we have developed in Brasília, our educational and content basis is the core curriculum for bioethics proposed by UNESCO. The content of our three compulsory and 24 optional disciplines is based on the 28 articles of UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights. Each of the 15 principles that form part of the declaration is addressed using different educational techniques, at different times during the students' educational development. Our objective is to train specialists in bioethics who have a secure command of the content of this field; who know how to focus their efforts on the essence of ethical conflicts; and who have political-social attitudes directed towards fighting to diminish the glaring differences that exist between rich and poor in today's world. One of our central objectives is therefore to use bioethics as a

theoretical and methodological instrument for constructing new academic scenarios that have the aim of socially including people and communities that had been excluded from the benefits that result from scientific and technological development.

What is your vision for ethics education? Will it expand and become more important? Will it be sidelined because of financial pressures? Will it be associated with global concerns and growing awareness of bioethical problems?

In my modest opinion, we need to fight globally in order to achieve greater visibility and a more concrete presence for the teaching of both ethics and bioethics. People who criticize the inclusion of ethical content in undergraduate and postgraduate programs within different academic fields need to understand that ethics can be a major cross-cutting and consolidating curricular vehicle for teaching and learning processes. Through teaching ethics and bioethics, we can provide students with training that is more human and socially solid. The world cannot continue in the way that it is today, i.e., with growing numbers of impoverished communities and countries despite so much development. Today, the world's food production is 30 % more than present-day human needs, yet tens of millions of people still go hungry every day. Ethics and bioethics can and must be converted into social tools for constructing a better and fairer world.

What kinds of activities are needed to expand bioethical education at the global level?

I believe that inclusion of bioethics as a discipline or as educational content within teaching programs in schools and universities may be a concrete vehicle for transformations. However, it is not enough to simply promote vertical inclusion of a sterile discipline in a static and inflexible curricular structure, without deepening the discussion on the contradictions that generate the ethical problems. It is essential that this discipline should deal with real concrete problems that are experienced by the students themselves and by their families, in their day-to-day lives. In summary, I advocate that the subject material of bioethics should be strongly politicized in order to transform the future professionals who are being trained, into concrete agents for change, so as to construct a better world.