Asian Experts Want Bioethics Incorporate Asian Values

SEOUL (UCAN) -- Bioethics experts from Asia have declared at a recent international forum that their cultural values should be a part of "universal" bioethical principles.

The presenters and panel members told the forum that universal principles on bioethics, as reflected in United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declarations, should take into consideration the strong family ties and community-centered traditions evidenced in much of Asia.

About 180 scholars, civil servants and students attended the "International Forum on Bioethics and Asian Culture" July 29-30 at Ewha Women's University in Seoul. Forum presenters and panel members came from China, India, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand, as well as Morocco in Africa.

South Korea's Ministry of Health, Welfare and Family Affairs and UNESCO jointly hosted the event, and the Catholic Institute of Bioethics in Seoul sponsored it.

One forum moderator, Isidore Meng Kwang-ho, told UCA News on July 29 the forum aimed to review how the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (UDBHR), based on Western culture, is applied in Asian countries.

Meng, a member of UNESCO's International Bioethics Committee, noted that "the principles of individual responsibility, human rights and autonomy can be understood differently in Asian cultures. For example, decisions on medical issues are often made by the family rather than by an individual patient."

Accordingly, said Meng, who is also a member of the Committee for Life of Seoul Catholic archdiocese, "ethics principles embracing the close relations among family members and neighbors in Asia should be studied further, to be a harmonious part of the universal principles."

Bioethical principles included in the UDBHR concern human dignity and human rights, autonomy and individual responsibility, privacy and confidentiality, consent, respect for human vulnerability and personal integrity, and social responsibility and health.

Qiu Ren-zong, one of the forum presenters, told participants that people in Western countries tend to talk about their rights more than their duties. "If everybody claims their rights, who can look after them?" he asked.
Qui, a Chinese scholar from Peking Union Medical College, also noted that the family’s indispensable role in making decisions on medical matters and the physical and financial support of other family members for a patient may conflict with the UDBHR’s current “universal” values. For example, he said, the declaration does not even mention ‘family.’

Similarly, Morisaki Takayuki said in his own presentation that the Japanese traditionally respect and rely on family heads as well as government and civic authorities, even in the fields of medicine and biomedical research.

Even so, the Japanese professor of Osaka University Graduate School of Pharmaceutical Sciences admitted to UCA News on July 29 that Japanese society has been greatly influenced by Western cultures, with the traditional extended family now being largely replaced by the nuclear family.

"Decision-making on medical matters has shifted from family to individual, with the one exception of organ donation from a brain-dead patient, which needs a family’s consent," he said. Nonetheless, Morisaki said, "family bonds remain important, and we should not follow only Western individualism."

Sivandam Panneerselvam spoke on ecological insights in Gandhian philosophy. The Indian scholar from the University of Madras said the late Mahatma Gandhi, "father of the Indian nation," believed all living beings, including humans, are equal and peacefully coexist as an organic entity.

Bioethics in the Asian context, Panneerselvam also pointed out, relies on religious traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism and Shintoism. In his view, cross-cultural understanding is necessary to develop truly universal bioethical principals.

In response to the presenters, Darryl Macer, Bangkok-based UNESCO regional advisor for Asia and the Pacific, said that UNESCO in principle does not judge one bioethical principle as correct and another as not. "UNESCO declarations provide a 'framework' for rediscovery of indigenous traditions," he said.

However, Macer did acknowledge that "bioethics," especially in the Asia and Pacific region, includes medical, environmental and other issues raised by science and technology.