

Reference

Webster, George C. (2010). **If I Could Say Five Things**. Presented at the Canadian Bioethics Society Annual Conference, Kelowna BC, June 10, 2010.

Summary

Dr. George Webster was the recipient of the 2010 Canadian Bioethics Society Lifetime Achievement Award, presented at the Canadian Bioethics Society Annual Conference in Kelowna, BC on June 10, 2010. Dr. Webster has been working in the field of health ethics for almost 30 years and is currently a Clinical Ethicist at St. Boniface General Hospital in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In this speech, he reflects on his career as an ethicist, specifically in relation to the following five areas:

1. *Complexity* - Dr. Webster discusses the complexity and difficulty of the issues that arise in health care and the importance of knowing what we do not know, when we are vulnerable and when we are in over our heads.
2. *Compromise* – He discusses moral distress and moral residue as long-term consequences of serious compromise in health care delivery. While he believes that compromise is an inescapable part of work in health ethics and often necessary to reach an acceptable decision when ethics issues arise, he cautions that while ethicists may expect *to* compromise in their work, they should endeavour to *not be* compromised.
3. *Courage* – Related to moral compromise, Dr. Webster highlights the importance – yet, the difficulty - of finding the courage to do health ethics work. He explains that it is at times when our integrity is seriously challenged that we feel most vulnerable; rather than turning away from our fears and vulnerabilities, we must find the courage to face them head on, even if it is a difficult thing to do.
4. *Context* – Dr. Webster describes context as “seeing what there is to see”, or being aware of the bigger picture rather than only focusing on the particulars of a situation. In this section, he discusses the importance of broader ethical issues such as food security, poverty and global health and expresses hope that the bioethics community is able to see and address these larger, contextual issues.
5. *Compassion and Kindness* – In this final section, Dr. Webster notes an increasing concern among patients and families regarding a lack of empathy, kindness and compassion in patient care. He muses about whether this is the result of burnout or compassion fatigue, or a more deep-seated change in the culture of health care. He explains that care providers are becoming ethically desensitized as the result of overwhelming distress within a strained health system. He imagines another possibility – a kinder path – in which we commit to cultivating a kinder work environment, communicating empathy and compassion, and being more attentive to the decisions we make and relationships we have.

Dr. Webster concludes by expressing that “The goal of any reflection about ethics is to not only think about the ‘good’, but to take the necessary steps to help bring about a more kind and humane world.”

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