“Intensive Course in Health and Human Rights
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Harvard University, Boston MA

Curtin-Sponsored Study Tour

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At the entrance to Harvard’s Public Health building

“If you put enough spider webs together, you can catch an elephant”.
African Proverb
Although the International Declaration of Human Rights was signed in 1948, collective understanding and social mobilization in response to the documents has been incredibly complex. Traditionally, violations of Human Rights are understood in terms of direct abuse—such as genital mutilation, female sex trafficking or torture. Until recently unless an obvious damage to health has occurred through a violation (e.g. the ill-health effects of torture), the connection between health and Human Rights has been rare. However, at the Harvard University of Public Health in Boston, a group of dedicated and passionate lecturers have drawn together their diverse experiences in applied health service work, health policy development and Human Rights law to develop a practical framework for professionals to use, advancing issues in public health by accessing the International Declaration of Human Rights.

As a student of International Health and Anthropology, my interest in social inequity and the intrinsic relationship with the public health issues faced by marginalized groups, has increasingly deepened. It was my lecturer, Dr Jaya Earnest at the Center for International Health, who directed me to the Conference at Harvard. Although the Conference was for professionals already working in the field, I was passionate about exposing myself to the current international professional health climate, as well as participating in a conference that offered a powerful framework for addressing health as a fundamental human right. Furthermore, the opportunity to forge a relationship with a university of such international prestige was unprecedented for me. Yet despite my enthusiasm, as a full time student my financial reality was severely stretched to support such an adventure!

However, over the last year, I have increasingly learnt to access campus support structures when faced with challenges. I initially approached Julie Lea at the Scholarships Office to discuss possibilities for financial support. She met me warmly and enthusiastically, and her advice? “Apply for a scholarship directly to Harvard. People never think it will happen to them, so they never apply. I say go for it!” Never thinking I’d get, I followed Julie’s advice and applied directly to Harvard. To my absolute surprise, I was awarded a partial scholarship! Yet still a long way short of financing the travel costs I again approached Julie, who put me in touch with Laura Stevens at the Guild. I cannot thank the Guild enough—Laura immediately gave over
her afternoon to flesh out my story and compile a letter directly to the Vice Chancellor asking for assistance. To my absolute amazement, I was granted extremely generous funds that made the trip possible. Without this assistance, I could not have attended the conference.

Some of us in the conference (guess who is busy taking snaps at the back?)

Walking into the Harvard conference felt a little like entering a meeting of world leaders. With over 35 different countries represented from Norway to Nigeria; Lebanon to Albania, each one of us sat behind microphones in alphabetical order. Delegates from major international organizations were present including the World Health Organization, United Nations AIDS and the Human Rights Commission, UNICEF and World Vision, as well as field professionals such as doctors, nurses, lawyers, policy developers and NGO providers. Of course amongst them sat an excited and enthusiastic Curtin delegate!

The course facilitators worked diligently to create a dynamic and interactive learning environment where participants were encouraged to share their knowledge and diverse expertise organically with the learned materials. The core content of the conference, the health and human rights ‘framework’, clearly provided inspiration and fresh motivation for professionals struggling to contain the extreme difficulties delivering and/or analyzing health work in a world of such extreme social injustice. Particularly moving responses came from a Sudanese woman who saw the power of applying the framework in her role as a UNICEF Youth coordinator, and dynamic and inspirational women from Nigeria who envisioned huge opportunities for integrating the content into their governmental work with citizen’s rights and health. In between
lectures, the opportunity to network and converse with everyone was unparalleled—listening and discussing different peoples experience was worthy of a PhD in itself! Ultimately as an Australian, it was incredibly humbling to bear witness to the stories people shared of their lives and challenges. So many people face such complex social, environmental, economical and political matrixes within their countries that I could not help but bow to their strength and dedication to continually fight for equity and justice.

The essence of the conference’s framework is that the health of the public is inextricably linked to issues of Human Rights; yet these sources of ill health often exist far deeper then obvious Human Rights violations. Johnathon Mann, a leader in the field of health and Human Rights, argued that these indirect violations can essentially dictate “…who lives and who dies, when, and of what…” (Mann et al 1999 :3). For example:

- Discrimination against minority groups (in any way such as on the basis of race, gender, religion, political opinion etc…) can restrict access to health services, impacting health status.
- Human Rights violations often exist within the actual design and implementation of national health policies (both purposefully and also unwittingly).
- The disregard of Human Rights will directly affect a populations health—particularly during civil conflict, natural disasters and other instabilities.

Ultimately, the respect and adherence to the Declaration of Human Rights in health services has the capacity to facilitate a far higher level of health care. For any professional involved in public health, this linkage becomes both obvious and paramount in advancing the health outcomes of populations. Thus a practical framework for applying key Human Rights conventions to health programming and practice has the potential to further community health for both the ‘developing’ and the ‘developed’ world.
For any passionate student, the opportunity to participate and place oneself amongst academic leaders and field professionals is the ultimate learning experience. For me, the course deeply enriched my studies, perceptions, knowledge, and of course, future employment prospects (the networking at the conference was incredible). The entire process taught me to go for it—make contacts, interact and use university resources. At every point of exchange that I had with Curtin (starting with the inspirational Julie, to the dedicated Guild team and the enthusiastic women at the Vice Chancellor’s office), I felt completely supported by a totally ‘can do’ philosophy. I feel incredibly lucky to be part of an institution that is dedicated to both encouraging its student’s academic advancement; and also supporting continuing education with in the field of social justice.

The Curtin Girls - Me, Jaya Earnest and Tanya Wells-Brown

Participants from Thailand, China and England