Campus Progress Journalism Guide
Focus On: Science and Bioethics

This guide was developed by staff and interns at CAP’s Progressive Bioethics Initiative and the CAP publication Science Progress. Its purpose is to provide you with some of the scientific and policy background behind cutting edge scientific and bioethical developments and debates, and to serve as a tool to help your publication incorporate science and bioethics issues.

In the broadest sense, bioethics is the study of the ethical, moral, and social implications of science and medicine. There is always some ambiguity about where bioethics begins and ends but it is always branching out to see how it can apply ethical principles to new technologies and scientific research. Bioethical discussion ranges from the philosophical: “What is life?” “What is free will?” to the practical: “Should I change my diet based on this genetic test?”

Common bioethics topics include beginning/end of life issues, stem cells, subject protection in research, cloning, genetic technologies, enhancement of the human body, privacy rights in healthcare and research, healthcare access and delivery.

We didn’t include every possible issue, but we have included a broad scope of topics and types of questions and angles. If there is a specific science/bioethics topic that you have curiosity or questions about or have suggestions on how to make this guide more useful and helpful, please e-mail David Spett at dspetti@americanprogress.org.

Before we get into the specific topics, here are some general tips to think about when undertaking science writing in your publication:

• There are several different vantage points from which you can write. Students on your campus may be generally interested in learning more about the science of the day. Philosophy majors may be interested in the more abstract discussions of bioethical questions; political science and public affairs majors may be interested in the policy implications of specific science topics; and hard science majors and pre-meds may be interested in these issues from a research and/or clinical practice point of view. By including relevant and timely scientific subject matter into your publication, it may be the case that you can increase your readership to include these (and potentially other) new audiences.

• Additionally, it’s important to note that science issues, and bioethics issues in particular, often tend to not fit in well with the traditional progressive v. conservative dichotomy that many of us know well.

• One common misstep in the discussion of science in the public sphere is the confusion of distinct scientific topics. For example, some think that cloning, stem cell research, and in vitro fertilization (IVF) are all the same thing.

• At the same time, even though we put issues/topics into separate categories, there are many instances in which they do relate to each other. For example, in vitro fertilization, while not stem cell research, can be connected to stem cell research in the sense that frozen embryos created by IVF but not used in a fertility treatment are donated to stem cell research. Articles that show germane connections between different topic areas are often more interesting and can attract a broader readership.
Avoid the false dichotomy that often presents science and ethics as opposing forces that must be balanced. They are continuously intertwined and they inform one another as part of an ongoing dialogue. Although scientific evidence is never perfect, it does not mean that “the science” is completely up for grabs for whoever wants to have “the science” on their side. Nevertheless, participants in bioethical dialogue can incorporate different interpretations of the evidence and emphasize different pieces of evidence provided that they are intellectually honest. Not everyone has to draw the same conclusions from scientific evidence but most readers should be able to understand how different conclusions can come from the same scientific evidence. This is how different views can proceed in an intellectually honest manner where proponents admit their values, biases, and inclinations and make the best evidence-based arguments they can for their views.

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