

local groups: York

Joanne Charles reports on a York day conference



Joanne Charles is a medical student at HYMS

The Body and the Church' day conference was hosted by York CMF in February 2020. The event was open to a wide church audience, and seminars addressed the difficult medical ethical issues of abortion, contraception, fertility, and end of life. Each talk considered modern technologies, and the biblical and moral implications on which Christians base their conclusions. As a first-year medical student, the clearest take-home point was how little I knew about such subjects.

A seminar addressing different aspects of euthanasia was particularly useful to me, given the BMA survey on 'Assisted Dying' being conducted at the time.¹ The talk highlighted how God's compassion can be shown despite the mystery of suffering, and Christians can show a better way through alternatives like palliative care. Recent legal changes have shown how quickly attitudes to the protection of human life can change and develop into demands for wider access across more vulnerable groups.²

However, the greatest surprise for me was how new the guidance about contraception was to many of us in the room. It became clear that birth control ethics aren't widely addressed in church services or even secular education. Commonly used contraceptives may act before or after an embryo is formed, but the latter are rarely labelled as abortifacient.³ The speaker suggested many ways to consider this, from traditional natural family planning to a three-point approach to assessing a method. This approach involved asking whether the method worked by stopping the egg release, sperm access or the embedding of a fertilised egg into the uterus.⁴ It would be really wonderful if other Christians could attend seminars like this,



especially as contraceptive use has become more commonplace amongst those who believe life begins at conception.

The talks on abortion and fertility were also approached very sensitively, focusing on equal rights, including those of the unborn, and the great need for compassion when discussing either. IVF is something I had never heard mentioned in church (or, understandably, five months into medical school). The speaker mentioned how the desire to have children was not selfish, but having children isn't necessarily a 'right' as the world seems to think it is. He addressed the common practice of fertilising many eggs for potential use in IVF, and how the 'extra' embryos can be discarded, stored indefinitely, or used for medical research. Alternatives could include requesting only the necessary number of eggs be fertilised or considering embryo adoption (Snowflake⁵ is a US example of such a programme). I was surprised something that I found so controversial was so established, although this theme was discussed throughout the day.

Ultimately, after this teaching, I pray that God equips medical professionals and members of the public with better knowledge on these controversial but hugely relevant subjects. It was a privilege to learn from the doctors speaking, and I hope others get the opportunity to hear this series of talks. ■

REFS

1. BMA launches survey to gather members' views on physician-assisted dying. 6 February 2020. bit.ly/BMAassisteddying
2. Canada government access assisted dying. 24 February 2020. bit.ly/Guardianassisteddying
3. Thomas R. *Contraception: a guide to ethical use*. London: Christian Medical Fellowship, 2017
4. Professional Ethics Committee of AAPLOG. Embryocidal Potential of Modern Contraceptives. 15 January 2020. bit.ly/embryocidalcontraception
5. Adopting a Snowflake baby. bit.ly/adoptingasnowflakebaby