

## BIOCEP- Building Intra-Columbia University and International Bridges in Bioethics

In July, 2007, the first two-week program, called **Bioethical Cross-cultural Education Program**, or BIOCEP, was launched by The Center for Bioethics at Columbia University. Students from Columbia College, Barnard College, the School of General Studies, and the Mailman School of Public Health joined Thai students of Bangkok's Mahidol University to engage in a comprehensive workshop examining the challenges of bioethics and medical ethics. Balancing the educational philosophies of Columbia University – scientific understanding, inquiry, discussion – and the experience of living and learning in Thailand, the program offered an unprecedented cross-cultural experience for students from all fields and backgrounds.

BIOCEP focused on ways that different cultures, religions, and governments respond to scientific and bioethical challenges, including emerging infections, the integration of Western and Eastern medicine, medical tourism, stem cell research, abortion, smoking, and reproductive medicine. Led by doctors, scientists, political leaders, and Buddhist monks, BIOCEP held numerous scientific, cultural, and religious workshops, including seminars at the Ministry of Public Health, Siriraj and Yanghee Hospitals, and Mahidol University. Participants also engaged in cultural events, visited historical sites, and traveled to some of the most spectacular sights in Thailand.

The students were provided with an opportunity to observe some of Thailand's unique Public Health strategies. They learned how innovative Thai educational anti-smoking campaigns, which involved shocking and graphic images of cancerous tissue on all cigarette cartons and smoking image bans in the media, dramatically decreased smoking prevalence. In the medical realm, infertility doctors do not refrain from imposing their own moral values and will not hesitate, for example, to deny a lesbian couple or single woman access to reproductive technologies because the resulting child would not have a "father" figure in the household. The students also learned of the high demand for medical tourism in Thailand, a major industry that has created facilities and private hospitals designed to attract foreigners to undergo a plethora of surgeries from nipple lightening to cardiac surgery and notoriously – sex change surgeries. A shocking and emotional experience for many students, both Thai and American, was the Wat Phra Baht Nam Phu AIDS temple, where end-stage patients with AIDS abstaining from medical treatment reside in a hospice-like environment served by one nurse and with little access to drugs. The temple museum utilized "shock value" in their educational anti-AIDS campaign, openly and graphically displaying preserved bodies, bones, and organs from deceased AIDS infected children and adults.

The program was a highly interactive academic learning experience for both Thai and American students. The Thai students were not accustomed to the "Columbia University" learning method of engaging in tense, open, and frank debates with faculty and fellow students on bioethical issues, sexuality, drug abuse, and contraception –the teaching standard in Thailand involved lecture without discussion. The lecture-debate learning style employed in BIOCEP enabled students and faculty from Thailand to learn about American perspectives on bioethics. Also, the program was designed to help students develop a strategic approach to resolving bioethical issues, incorporate a first-hand humanitarian experience into their health care education, and provide a non-political forum for open and informed dialogue. Columbia students readily agreed that the hallmark feature of the

program was to study bioethics with some of the most intelligent Thai students and faculty in a nation with an alternate perspective on almost every bioethical issue faced in America.

BIOCEP will continue to serve as a platform to build global bioethical bridges. Recruitment is starting now for the next summer's BIOCEP experience.