FORUM FOR MEDICAL ETHICS SOCIETY

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Annual report

April 1, 2024 to March 31, 2025

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I. Introduction

Founded in 1993 by a group of medical practitioners disillusioned with unethical medical practices, the Forum for Medical Ethics Society (FMES) evolved into a wider umbrella group for individuals from diverse backgrounds interested in bioethics and a number of other areas of interfacing of bioethics, health, law and regulations, policy, and research. Over the past 32 years, FMES established three platforms — *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics* (*IJME*) (since 1993), NBC (since 2005), and Health, Ethics, and Law Institute (HEaL Institute) for Training, Research and Advocacy (since 2018).

At FMES, we conceive both health and bioethics in a much broader manner considering wide range of social and structural determinants of health; and acknowledging the deep relations between human health and health of the planet as such. The latter allows us to conceive bioethics more inclusively to not lose sight of animal health, and environmental matters which have deep implications for human health and what is now referred to as planetary health.

We take this opportunity to introduce our three platforms and report on the work accomplished during the period between April 1, 2024, and March 31, 2025.

II. *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics* (*IJME*)

Indian Journal of Medical Ethics, earlier known as *Medical Ethics* and *Issues in Medical Ethics*, is a multi-disciplinary academic journal, has been published without a break from 1993. The journal is the official journal of the Forum for Medical Ethics Society, Mumbai, India. *IJME* is platinum access journal, that is, access to its current issue, and the entire digital archive of all issues of *IJME* from its inception is free and neither authors have to pay to publish their work nor readers have to pay to access it. *IJME* is the only indexed and peer reviewed leading bioethics journal in India and among a few in the South Asia region.

It was established with the aim of fostering debate and contributing to scholarships in bioethics. *IJME* provides a platform for original content and discussion on all aspects of healthcare ethics, as well as law, history, literature, philosophy and the humanities where they intersect with health and healthcare. With the completion of 31 years of sustained regular publication, it has emerged as a leader in this field in low- and middle-income countries. As a respected peer-reviewed journal, its content is used in teaching ethics courses in universities, and other settings outside of academia in India and elsewhere; and has been cited by the apex court and other Indian courts. It also serves as a rich resource for professionals from across the disciplines to help them respond to ethical dilemmas in their respective professional practice.

Indexing: The journal has been indexed with Medline/PubMed (since 2005) retrospectively, and also in Scopus and The Philosopher's Index (TPI). We have been part of PubMed's LinkOut facility from 2017 onwards, in order to provide direct access to readers searching the database.

Periodicity: The print issue of the journal is published every quarter — January, April, July and October, of each year, without ever combining two issues.

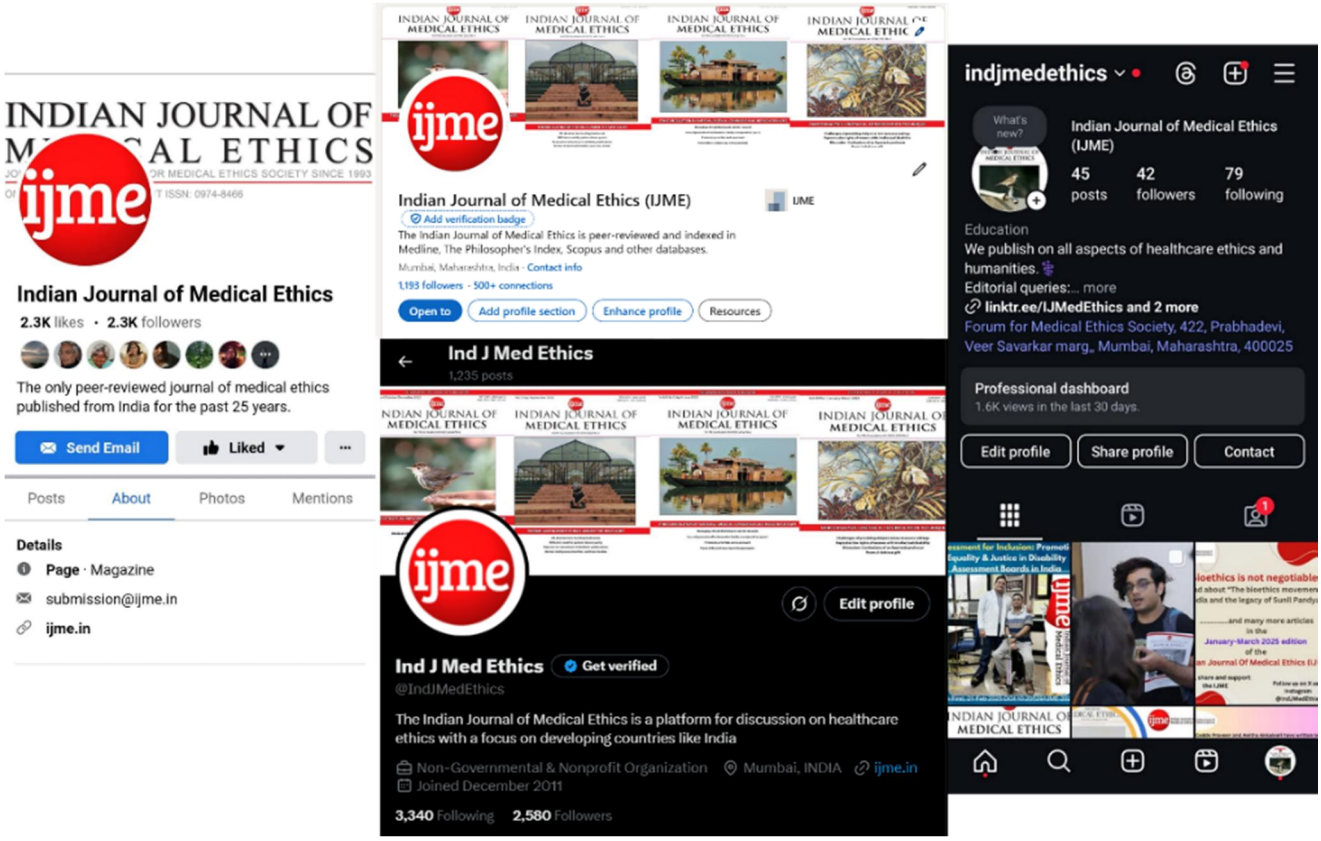
Online First: To avoid delays and reduce the waiting time for publication, *IJME* publishes accepted articles online first. These articles are indexed immediately after online publication and can be cited using the date of access and the unique DOI given to these articles.

Editors and reviewers: We are fortunate to have dedicated Working Editors Group (WEG) — the core group of editors — who not only handle all the submissions to the journal but also are involved in the decision-making process. Their time and contributions to *IJME* as working editors is entirely pro-bono

along with the editor of the journal. We are also grateful to the dedicated members of the editorial board and expert reviewers who remain deeply invested in *IJME* by providing high-quality review of manuscripts we receive, an essential component of quality publishing.

Editorial office: As of March 2025, we have two full time and one part time staff for FMES-*IJME* work, and one Editorial Consultant on a voluntary basis, who majorly helps us with the copyediting of manuscripts, assisting with suggesting reviewers for the submissions, and on various other matters relating to running the journal.

Social media presence: *IJME* uses its social media presence to widely disseminate the articles published in the journal and connect with its readers. We are present on various social media platforms such as X (twitter), LinkedIn, and Facebook, and have recently joined Instagram.



Statutory registration details of *IJME*:

- ISSN (online): 0975-5691
- ISSN (print): 0974-8466
- RNI Registration Number: MAHENG/2016/67188

Web management and online submission system: *IJME* went digital in 2003. Since then, we have had the Open Journal System (OJS) at the backend for handling manuscripts internally, and WordPress at the frontend to publish articles. OJS is an open-source framework created by the Public Knowledge Project (PKP) which provides a publishing platform for journals — an online management system used for handling all the manuscripts from its submission to publishing. In May 2024, we opened OJS for all our authors and reviewers. Currently, we use it at the backend for handling submissions till copyediting, while we are working on expanding its functionalities and on integrating our current WordPress website

(frontend) with the OJS to be able to publish articles directly through the OJS.

We have two separate IT vendors to help us navigate technical issues for the OJS and our website. In an effort to be self-sufficient in technical management, we continue to do in-house website management including page-making, uploading of content on websites, and management of the back end.

Publications from April 2024 to March 2025: During this period, a total of 120 papers were published, of which 94 featured in the four issues from Apr-Jun 2024 to Jan-Mar 2025 printed during the reporting period and the rest 26 were published under 'Online first', which are to be added in the future issues. The articles included in the issues also consisted of articles submitted in the previous Financial Years. All the past and present issues of the *IJME* can be found in the Archive section of the website.

Reviewers for 2024-25: We are grateful to our committed reviewers for their contribution in evaluating and improving submissions. Besides our core group of editors, we thank members of the editorial board and others who reviewed manuscripts during the year 2024-25:

Aarthy Ramasamy, Amarendra Pattnaik, Amita Pitre, Amol Dongre, Anand Teltumbde, Angus Dawson, Anjan Shah, Anupama Iyer, Anuradha Rose, Arima Mishra, Aritra Chatterjee, Arnav Mahurkar, Bijoya Roy, C Kesavadas, Chayanika Shah, Chinonyerem O Iheanacho, Chinu Srinivasan, Daisy Dutta, Deepa Venkatachalam, Denny John, Dharmagadda Sreedhar, Dheeraj Kattula, Dipen Dabhi, George Thomas, GL Krishna, Gurpreet Singh, Isha Sinha, Jagadeesh N, Jagdish Patel, Jagriti Gangopadhyay, Jissa VT, Joel Lexchin, John Stephen, Kannan Thiruvengadam, Kiran Kumbhar, Kishor Patwardhan, KM Gopakumar, Lara Jesani, Leena Abraham, Leonardo Rodrigues, Madhav Deshpande, Madhavi Bhargava, Madhulika Banerjee, Madhurima Ghosh, Malini Aisola, Manjulika Vaz, Mario Vaz, Melvin Mathew Thomas, Molly Jacob, Monali Mohan, Mrinal Patnaik, Mukta Gundi, Nandan Kamath, Nani Gopal Das, Nilangi Sardeshpande, Niveen Abu-Rmeileh, Parvathy Balachandran, Pavithra Arunachaleswaran, Prabir Chatterjee, Prachy Hooda, Pradeep Mandhyan, Prinu Jose, Priya Satalkar, Priyadarshini Chidambaram, Priyadarshini Kulkarni, Priyansh Nathani, Radha Ramaswamy, Radha Sundaram, Rakhal Gaitonde, Ranjith Viswanath, Ravi Prasad Varma, Ravi Vaswani, Reethu Salim, Robyna Irshad Khan, Rohin Bhatt, Roli Mathur, Samuel Ujewe, Sangeeta Rege, Sanjida Arora, Santanu Tripathi, Sapna Mishra, Sebin George, Seema Hashmi, Shaibya Saldanha, Sharmitha Krishnamurthy, Shruti Bhide, Shubhada Nagarkar, Sualeha Shekhani, Subhash Chandra Lakhotia, Sujata Sinha, Sumana Navin, Sundar Sarukkai, Sundari Ravindran, Supriya Subramani, Thiagarajan Sundararaman, Tijo George, Timothy Daly, Uma Kulkarni, Umer Hussain, Urvi Khasnis, V Sridhar, Varsha Barde, Vedamurthy Adhiyaman, Vibhuti Patel, Vijaya Raghavan, Vina Vaswani, Vishnu B Menon, William Joe, Yuvraj Krishnamoorthy

Tribute: Dr Sunil K Pandya, Founder Editor of *IJME*, passed away on December 17, 2024. He was an established neurosurgeon, a respected professor and an ethical practitioner. In his memory, we published a tribute in January 2025. This tribute includes personal reminiscences of close colleagues about the man himself, his felicitation by *IJME* in 2010, and a selection of his writings from the journal, presented in the original format.

III. National Bioethics Conference

Several troubling ethical issues peculiar to the Indian context and related to the eastern culture needed deliberation and analysis in a supportive and unbiased environment. Recognizing this need, FMES created the platform of the National Bioethics Conference (NBC) in 2005.

The formation of the NBC platform was motivated by the need to create space for reflection, open debates, expression of diverse perspective on one single topic, and coming together of people interested in the multidisciplinary, intersectional and intersectoral conversations on issues relating to health and allied themes towards improvement of people's well-being, improving the healthcare system, responding to newer issues with advances in health technologies, and the changing terrain of health issue on account of environmental concerns — climate change.

All NBCs involved co-hosts and collaborators which has made the platform a shared one despite being established by FMES. NBCs are co-hosted by FMES along with various other entities — academic institutes, and nongovernment organizations from across India. Furthermore, when there are opportunities, collaborations with international platforms have also been secured in the past.

Although called 'National Bioethics Conference', it does attract participants from the South Asia region, and from the Global North. NBCs are organized every two years. So far, we have organized ten NBCs, each attracting between 350 and 700 participants. These have been on themes of contemporary relevance. Seven of them until before the pandemic were off-line and were hosted at different academic and non-academic institutes from across the public and private sectors. The rest of the three were organised virtually starting from the pandemic times. Details of all past NBCs can be found on the main website of NBC under the tab "Past NBCs". The tenth NBC (10th NBC) was organised during this reporting year, a short report on which is presented below.

10th National Bioethics Conference

The theme of the 10th NBC was **Artificial Intelligence (AI) In Health Care: Ethics, Law and Human Rights Matters**, which sought to strengthen bioethics by providing a relevant and critical platform to advance bioethics discourses relating to the introduction of AI in healthcare; and to help inform praxis — policies, program, and guidance towards responsible AI.

This edition of the conference was co-organized by the Forum for Medical Ethics Society (FMES), the *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics* (*IJME*) ; and the Christian Medical College Vellore (CMC Vellore), Vellore.

The 10th NBC (main conference) took place virtually on March 28–29 and April 4–5, 2025 from 2:30 pm to 7:30 pm IST.

The main conference was preceded by an in-person Pre-conference Peer Learning Workshop co-organized by FMES, *IJME;* CMC Vellore, Vellore and the Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IIT M), Chennai,

on January 28–29, 2025. It was hosted in-person at the IIT M, Chennai.

Pre-Conference

The two-day workshop was aimed at bringing together multidisciplinary players/stakeholders deeply engaged with health-AI for in-depth conversation to share knowledge, and to peer learn drawing upon each other's experiences with focus on laws, and regulations which have bearing on development and deployment of responsible health-AI. It was also aimed at cross disciplinary engagement and creating networking opportunities across disciplines and sectors, an essential element of responsible and user-centered health-AI tools/interventions towards contributing to bettering the healthcare center-staging care-receivers' best interest.

Conversations with the participants during tea and lunch breaks, and during the closing session meant for feedback and input, suggest that it was well received. The multidisciplinary approach to conceptualizing the session plan was something many found innovative, relevant and timely.

Details of the pre-conference can be found at the following links:

- Pre-conference page
- Session plan
- Session faculty
- Session themes and synopses

Main conference

The main conference was held virtually on March 28–29 and April 4–5, 2025.

The main conference began with inauguration and felicitation, followed by three plenaries and four technical sessions, spread over four days. It was concluded with a valedictory session on April 5, 2025. About forty speakers and chairs from diverse disciplines and professional backgrounds — including representatives from civil society groups, academic institutions, policy organizations, and users of health-AI tools, across both public and private sectors — came together for a rigorous discussion on various aspects of AI in healthcare. The speakers came from around the world in addition to activists, scholars and professionals from within India.

The idea was to expand the conversations, deliberations, and critique beyond the technical aspects of AI to better appreciate both benefits of AI and challenges involved in AI development, deployment, and post-deployment assessment towards right, relevant, scientifically valid health-AI tools that ensure inclusive, user-centered, and equitable health-AI or responsible health-AI. These sessions spread over four days covered a wide spectrum of aspects of health-AI, such as ethics, human rights, law, regulations, governance, and policy matters. Non plenaries covered specific areas such as mental health, experiences of those marginalized communities as users of AI, publication spaces. More details of the plenaries, non-plenary sessions, and relevant information regarding synopses, speakers, and sessions plans are available at the NBC website.

FMES-*IJME* Ethics Awards

FMES and *IJME* have been working for over 30 years to bring ethical concerns in healthcare to the forefront and to embed ethics into healthcare practices, health research, and policy. Numerous individuals and organizations, through their dedication and collective efforts over the years, have helped make ethics a part of the public discourse on healthcare practice, research, and policy in India.

At present, there are limited avenues to recognize the contributions of individuals and civil society-based groups to healthcare ethics and bioethics in India, and to honor them for their efforts, which are making a difference in people's lives in diverse ways. The tradition of felicitating individuals who have contributed to scholarship and/or activism, policy, and legal reforms in health, ethics, human rights, medical humanities, and allied areas was initiated in 2005, on the launch of our biennial National Bioethics Conference platform. The FMES-*IJME* Ethics Award is a recurring event of the biennial NBCs.

Awardees

As part of the 10th NBC, the FMES Managing Committee, the *IJME* working editors, and the core organizing team of the conference decided to confer the FMES-*IJME* Ethics Awards on two veterans:

Dr Lopa Mehta was felicitated for her lifelong contribution to quality medical education with a focus on raising student awareness of medical ethics and medical humanities, on honest and dedicated medical care, and on challenging established stereotypes in healthcare education through scholarly research and writing, always informed by a philosophical perspective.

Dr Anant Phadke were felicitated for his dedicated and unrelenting long-term engagement with health movements at local and national levels, towards health equity and justice, and the right to quality health care for all.

The felicitation ceremony was live streamed on YouTube and their respective speeches were later published in the Apr-Jun 2025 issue of the *IJME*.

IV. Health, Ethics, and Law Institute (HEaL Institute) for Training, Research and Advocacy

The Health, Ethics and Law Institute (HEaL Institute) for Training, Research and Advocacy, a programmatic platform of FMES, is the youngest one amongst the three platforms of FMES. It was

established in 2018-2019. The HEaL Institute aims to serve as a bridge between academia and activism for promoting and safeguarding people's democratic and constitutional entitlement to health. The HEaL institute takes a multi-disciplinary, multi-sectoral, and intersectional approach which enables it to critically engage with law, regulations, and constitutional entitlements.

Public consultation on guidelines for withdrawal of life support in terminally ill patients

On October 13, 2024, FMES, *IJME* along with Bharati Vidyapeeth Deemed to be University Medical College and Hospital (BVDUMC), via a public consultation, reviewed the guidelines for withdrawal of life support issued by the *Ministry of Health and Family Welfare* to identify any gaps, inadequacies, key bottlenecks, and offered concrete suggestions towards improvements and comprehensiveness, both on its substantive and practical dimensions.

Some key aspects of the conversation were:

- Patient and family centeredness of the guidelines (ability to honour rights of patients and significant others to their agency in a broader sense, accessibility of patients and families in relation to space for in-depth conversations with the treating team, EOLC literacy).
- Translation of these guidelines into practice in diverse and complex contexts (healthcare system, socio-cultural-economic circumstances of patients, legal-judiciary environment).
- Identification of gaps in the Guidelines and how they can be addressed.

The proceedings of this consultation were documented and were complemented with additional critical inputs on the draft Guidelines into a detailed submission to the *Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India* and were submitted on behalf of the participants in the public consultation and the organizers of the public consultation.

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