

## ETHICS AND POLICY: DEALING WITH PUBLIC ATTITUDES

M. Sheehan

James Martin Research Fellow, Program on Ethics and the New Biosciences, Faculty of Philosophy  
and James Martin 21<sup>st</sup> Century School, Oxford University, UK

The current trend towards ethical scrutiny and oversight is very much a social trend. Exposés, public enquiries and the language of openness and transparency typify the response to instances of wrongdoing. Many of the results of this trend are perfectly reasonable but some go harmfully too far. It is difficult in the context of strong social trends to keep the response proportional. In all of this professions like radiology are forced to consider the ways in which they can both guard against wrongdoing and ensure that the central tenets of the profession are protected and maintained. In this paper I advocate caution about public attitudes and social trends. Although there is often a degree of truth in them, there is an inevitable simplification of the issues involved. The more specific danger for the professions is to think that public attitudes and social trends simply deliver 'the ethical'. In this context I consider the adequacy of moral relativism to deliver an account of ethics that is relevant for professions like radiology confronting the demands of ethical scrutiny and oversight. The paper concludes with some suggestions about how to incorporate the important aspects of public attitudes and social trends without being subservient to them.

E-mail presenting author:

[mark.sheehan@philosophy.ox.ac.uk](mailto:mark.sheehan@philosophy.ox.ac.uk)