

***Religion and Medical Ethics Symposium press conference remarks, December 10, 2019 by Sultana Afdhal, CEO, World Innovation Summit for Health***

Hello. On behalf of the World Innovation Summit for Health, I want to thank you all for giving your valuable time to join us at this press conference today.

I want to thank Archbishop Paglia and his team at the Pontifical Academy for Life for being open to co-hosting a symposium on “Religion and Medical Ethics” with us, and Kamran and The BMJ for working with us to ensure that the medical perspective is present during our discussions. Tomorrow’s symposium has been developed to shine a light on ethical questions around palliative care and on the mental health of the elderly, and whether participants in the event are healthcare policy makers, representatives of faith groups, or are carrying out the vital role of providing day-to-day patient care, we want them to find value in our event.

As the CEO of the World Innovation Summit for Health – WISH – which is a part of the Doha-based non-profit Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development, I was absolutely delighted and honoured to announce earlier this year that we would be co-hosting this week’s event with our very special friends from the Pontifical Academy for Life.

In 2018, WISH published a report on Islamic ethics and palliative care, which was discussed at length at our biennial global summit last November in Doha – an event that attracts more than 2,000 healthcare leaders. Early this year, we signed a declaration on palliative care with the Pontifical Academy for Life that in October was used as the basis for a positioning paper around palliative care that was endorsed by a large group of Abrahamic faith leaders and was subsequently presented to His Holiness the Pope by Archbishop Paglia.

Since WISH was launched, at the World Global Health Policy Summit in London in 2012, our mission has been to build a healthier world through global collaboration. It is therefore a natural progression for us to be here in Vatican City to actively promote dialogue between people of faith and medical experts around issues that have such a profound affect on individuals, their families, their communities, and healthcare workers.

WISH sees itself as providing a solid platform that enables the meeting-up of global experts and stakeholders to discuss key healthcare matters. Our parent organization, Qatar Foundation, now has almost 25 years of experience working in education, science and community development both at home in Qatar and around the world. While here in Vatican City we want to initiate conversations that have the genuine potential to benefit humanity as a whole, regardless of individual’s beliefs.

The interfaith nature of this event, and the involvement of experts from both a faith and a medical background, will provide a priceless opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the very real ethical dilemmas experienced by healthcare practitioners from different spiritual backgrounds across our world when dealing with these sensitive, and yes, difficult subjects for a great many of us.

There is no doubt in my mind that sharing knowledge from different religions and medical healthcare perspectives enriches and expands our thinking. I also believe we will all gain something from learning about how other faiths respond to these issues,

and perhaps discover some fresh approaches to follow, both medically and spiritually.

In-depth interfaith and medical interdisciplinary dialogue about palliative care and the mental health of older members in our communities is essential in helping to establish a common ground. This will aid our task in finding more effective ways to bridge differences in ethical approaches based on faith, whether actual or perceived. Without wanting to pre-empt the discussions that we will have, I anticipate that we'll end up finding more commonalities than differences.

By seeking to provide more uniform approaches to dealing with ethical challenges, we can be more effective in our efforts to help those in need. We can also be united in our efforts to advance the idea that to treat people holistically and in a way that alleviates suffering requires a willingness to consider a person's spiritual needs, as well as their physical and mental needs.

We will be discussing some very emotive matters over the next two days, such as suicide among older members of society and end-of-life care for children. I realise these will be very difficult and upsetting areas for us to debate. However, it is both right and important that we do not shy away from these topics, and I believe our discussions can only benefit those who are affected and afflicted by such issues, as we take back our shared knowledge and understanding to our respective communities around the world once the symposium comes to a close.