

# SPECIAL FEATURE

## ReproCen, 1993-1998: Enriching Medical and Legal Education

Ma. Lourdes O. Acosta, Ma. Delia A. Monares and Marita V.T. Reyes\*

They say - *the future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams. And for trailblazers, they allow dreams to crystallize in the "here and now."*

The story of **ReproCen** approximates this. It is like a "fresh wind" that permeates the traditional arena of two highly prestigious professions - **medicine and law**. In 1993, a group of concerned faculty members in both the U.P. College of Law and the U.P. College of Medicine envisioned a project that responds to the *vacuum in addressing ethical issues on reproductive health*. That collaborative project on ethics and reproductive health is now popularly known as **ReproCen** (Reproductive Health, Rights and Ethics Center for Studies and Training) and is housed at the U.P. College of Law for the last five years. *Today, ReproCen is proud to have a multidisciplinary pool of experts from law, medicine, the social sciences, public health, gender and development, and, human rights.*

Together with its network institutions, it has provided a *unique venue* for a multidisciplinary dialogue on ethics, reproductive health and related concerns among lawyers, doctors, social scientists and women's groups. For a long time, there was an absence of professional service and training on reproductive health care that adequately situate medical and legal issues in the context of ethics, gender and reproductive rights.



**ReproCen's Inauguration, June 1993**

(At the photo: Dean Pacifico Agabin of the U.P. College of Law, Prof. Alfredo Tadiar, Project Director, Dr. Nikki Jones of the Ford Foundation, Dean Jane Baltazar of the U.P. College of Public Health, and guests).

\*Malou Acosta is the Program Officer of REPROCEN; Dr. Delia Monares is the Assistant Project Director of REPROCEN and a faculty of the Women and Development Program, CSWCD, University of the Philippines; Dr. Marita Reyes is the Project Coordinator of REPROCEN. Dr. Reyes is also a professor at the College of Medicine, University of the Philippines-Manila, and, also a former Dean of the U.P. College of Medicine.

Since 1993 up to the present (1998), ReproCen, as a university project, has endeavored to create public awareness on ethics and reproductive rights through education and training.

Informed by issues in reproductive health and rights, ReproCen's mission is to *engender ethics* in professional education, research and service delivery in the fields of medicine/health care, law and the social sciences. **Its vision is to enable people to make meaningful choices based on ethical considerations and to accept responsibility for such choices.**

#### **Why Reproductive Health, Rights and Ethics?**

**ReproCen's** challenge lies in the recognition that the realm of reproductive health elicits much debate on issues related to ethics, gender and women's rights/human rights, among others. It is also noted that in the medical profession/health care system, the legal system/law profession, the social services, among others, there is an inadequate understanding of the ethical, legal and gender issues involved in reproductive health.

Along these concerns, **ReproCen** endeavors to promote an understanding of reproductive health and rights issues using the perspectives of ethics, gender and human rights. It is hoped that this will pave the way for a better handling of reproductive health problems. This, in turn, has a bearing on better services for women, and eventually, achieving an efficient health care and legal systems.

**ReproCen** is privileged to have a multidisciplinary pool of resource faculty from the College of Law, the College of Medicine, the College of Public Health as well as from the social sciences. They provide technical/program support to **ReproCen**, together with the rest of the project staff.

#### **Initial Linkage of Law and Medicine**

In 1990, the U.P. College of Medicine and the U.P. College of Law are already having consultations and dialogue regarding the proposed **Institute of Law and Medicine (ILM)**. This resulted in the creation of a Committee on the proposed Institute involving members of the faculty of medicine and law. The concern of the ILM is the development of expertise and competence in legal medicine, medical jurisprudence or the forensic sciences.

The vision of the ILM is to

provide for expanded opportunities and means for the practitioners in law and medicine to dialogue and exchange views on matters of mutual concerns such as, but not limited to, the education of medical doctors regarding the Philippine judicial system and their role therein or the training of lawyers to acquaint them on certain medico-legal knowledge so that they maybe more effective agents of justice ....

-Draft Memorandum of Agreement, U.P. College of Medicine and U.P. College of Law, 24 March 1990

*In the subsequent years, the ILM remains to be crystallized.* Yet, it paved the way for a closer coordination between the faculty of both colleges.





## ReproCen's Challenging Journey, 1993-1998

With a grant from the Ford Foundation, ReproCen's first project phase was in 1993 to 1995. It is now winding-up its second project phase (1995-1998).

Its inception was inspired by the realization that ethical issues in reproductive health was not fully discussed in the Philippine setting. This sentiment was expressed by participants of a Ford Foundation forum on reproductive health ethics which Dr. Ruth Macklin, a well-known bio-ethicist based at the New York Medical School, conducted in 1992. The participants included the would-be founding members of ReproCen who were then part of a joint faculty committee tasked to establish the UP Institute of Law and Medicine.

**ReproCen** started as a special project of the joint committee for the establishment of ILM, with the support of Ford Foundation. *Its general intent was to promote discourse and study on the ethical, legal and medical aspects of reproductive health. Specifically, it aims to promote the teaching of ethics in reproductive health in both UP College of Medicine and the UP College of Law through faculty and curriculum development.*



- Though ReproCen focused on the ethical dimension of reproductive health (RH), particularly the use of ethical principles in decision-making, it also found itself dealing not only with RH concerns but other issues in bioethics (e.g., medical ethics) as well.
- Bringing to the fore the perspectives of, and issues on, *ethics and human rights in the area of reproductive health* meant advancing the evolving concept of reproductive health that implies the notion of women's empowerment (particularly of women as ethical/moral agents). In ReproCen's activities, therefore, the women's perspective was always cast as a major concern.
- Its emphasis on ethics and its primary target which are medical/health care professionals is what sets ReproCen apart from other initiatives to promote reproductive rights.
- ReproCen's achievement lies in its rich public education history which is marked by various multi-disciplinary fora on different RH issues and problems such as abortion, family planning, violence against women, adolescent sexuality, HIV/AIDS etc. and the related responsibilities of professionals. Its professional education (and faculty development) program, designed for professionals in the fields of law, medicine/health care and social services consists of case conferences and seminar-workshops which entail the ethical analysis of selected cases.
- Efforts at curriculum development in the College of Medicine, after some initial difficulties, eventually made their mark (e.g., ReproCen facilitated the formation and implementation of a Bioethics Committee and the enrichment of courses, through faculty members involved in the project).

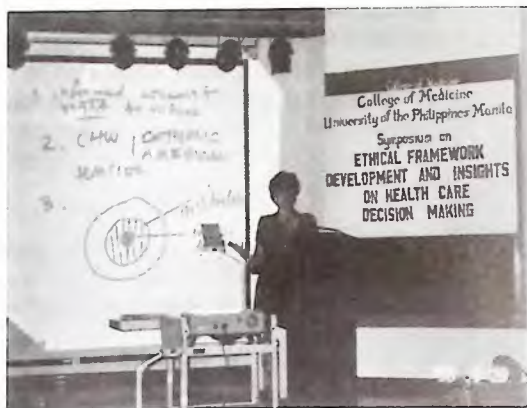
Curricular enrichment at the College of Law involved symposia on relevant legal issues (e.g., reproductive rights issues in legal debates) and discussion of these issues at relevant courses. Given the traditional assumptions of law on women, ReproCen's uphill journey has never been more felt than in its efforts at integrating ethical concerns on RH/rights issues in the College of Law.

### Accomplishments/Legacy

- ReproCen helped direct attention to the evolving concept of Reproductive Health (i.e. women's health and well-being), particularly its ethical dimension;
- ReproCen provided venues for its audiences (health/medical/legal professionals, students, etc.) to confront and examine their values, attitudes, assumptions or views related to ethical issues and decision-making;
- ReproCen's work has reinforced the need for further exploration on the relationship/intersection of **ethics, gender and human rights vis-à-vis RH and sexuality**;
- By uncovering gaps and inherent limitations in thinking and practice in medical/health care, legal and social services, **ReproCen's work has highlighted the extent to which further and new work in this area is needed.**

*Working to advance transformative views and modes of thinking within institutional environments and a socio-cultural context where conservative mindsets prevail is, indeed, a continuing struggle. Despite this climate, ReproCen keeps on its path guided by the vision of a society where people are able to make meaningful choices based on ethical considerations and to accept responsibility for such choices. It is sustained by an unwavering hope for a better world, and the desire to contribute, in its own way, to the healing of the world.*

# Snapshots of ReproCen Activities



ReproCen Members of the Board, Steering Committee and Staff General Meeting, December 15, 1998

