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The Hague Ethical Guidelines: applying the norms of the practice of chemistry to support the Chemical Weapons Convention

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Chemicals have essential roles in the advancement of human well-being and for a thriving global economy but at the same time many can be used as weapons or for making them. As the events in Syria over the past few years have shown, in spite of the progress toward complete destruction of the world's declared stocks of chemical weapons, they remain a threat to global peace and security. The global chemistry community can play an important role in helping to prevent their re-emergence. In March and September 2015, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons hosted two workshops with representatives from academia, industry, and chemical societies to explore the development of ethical guidelines for chemistry professionals. As a result, in October 2015 *The Hague Ethical Guidelines* were published to provide a framework for promoting the debate on the vital dimension of ethics in relation to chemical disarmament and non-proliferation on all levels of education, research, and practice of the chemical sciences and industries.

Keywords: chemical weapons; Ethical Guidelines in Chemical Education and Practice; The Hague Ethical Guidelines; Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons

Introduction

Chemicals can be designed to serve many specific purposes, such as in medicine or a wide array of industrial applications. In most cases, the practice of chemistry improves the quality of life for humans and the environment. But the same knowledge, tools, and technology that have produced great benefits can also cause great harm. As a way of strengthening the existing culture of responsible conduct in the chemical sciences and to guard against the misuse of chemistry, in November 2014 the permanent representative of the Federal Republic of Germany to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) put forward a proposal to develop ethical guidelines for chemistry professionals, related to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). The proposal was endorsed by the Conference of the States Parties at its Nineteenth Session, in December 2014.

The Conference welcomed the initiative for a text of ethical guidelines for chemical professionals related to the Convention and invited the Secretariat to inform the Council of its efforts for the advancement of the initiative and its objectives in close collaboration with relevant professional and chemical industry organizations. The Conference encouraged States Parties to discuss the matter further (OPCW 2014, 14).

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The OPCW facilitated two workshops involving a group of 36 scientists and chemistry professionals from over 20 countries, including all regional groups, to discuss and draft possible ethical guidelines for the practice of chemistry under the norms of the Convention. The workshops took place at OPCW Headquarters in The Hague. Summary reports of both workshops are available on the OPCW public website (OPCW 2015a, 2015b).

The first workshop on Ethical Guidelines for the Practice of Chemistry under the Norms of the CWC, which was held from 10 to 11 March 2015, included 18 participants representing academia, industry, and chemical societies. The workshop participants reviewed existing ethical codes, drawing on a compilation of more than 140 codes identified through Internet searches or provided by chemistry practitioners (OPCW 2015c). They also examined previous and current code initiatives, received a briefing on experiences from the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention, and were provided with a chemical industry perspective. Key elements of CWC relevant ethical guidelines, principles, and best practices for drafting guidelines, and synergy with other current initiatives were discussed.

The second workshop took place from 17 to 18 September 2015, with the attendance of 33 participants, chemistry practitioners from all regional groups, including 15 of the original 18 participants of the first workshop. The workshop arrived at a consensus text, *The Hague Ethical Guidelines*, which were endorsed by participants of both the March and September workshops and posted on the OPCW public website (OPCW 2015d).

The Hague Ethical Guidelines are intended to serve as elements for ethical codes and discussion points for ethical issues related to the practice of chemistry under the Convention. The core element of the guidelines is based on the premise that “achievements in the field of chemistry should be used to benefit humankind and the environment.” The guidelines provide a useful framework for debating the vital dimension of ethics in relation to chemical disarmament and non-proliferation. The complete text, including the preamble and guidelines, is as follows.

The Hague Ethical Guidelines

The responsible practice of chemistry improves the quality of life of humankind and the environment. Through their many peaceful uses, such as in research and industry, chemicals play an essential role in this improvement. However, some chemicals can also be used as chemical weapons or to create them, and these weapons are among the most horrific in the world.

The 1993 CWC embodies the powerful international norm against chemical weapons, requiring its States Parties “never under any circumstances: (a) To develop, produce, otherwise acquire, stockpile or retain chemical weapons, or transfer, directly or indirectly, chemical weapons to anyone; (b) To use chemical weapons; (c) To engage in any military preparations to use chemical weapons; (d) To assist, encourage or induce, in any way, anyone to engage in any activity prohibited to a State Party under this Convention.” The task of destroying the world’s declared stockpiles of chemical weapons is close to completion, but the threats that the use of chemicals as weapons pose to global security have not yet been eliminated.

As destruction of the remaining chemical weapons continues, a concerted effort is needed to prevent their re-emergence. This includes training and raising awareness among chemistry practitioners, defined as anyone trained in chemistry as well as others dealing with or handling chemicals. Their support is needed so that production and use of



Workshop participants and observers, 17–18 September 2015.

chemicals is accompanied by recognition of the responsibility to ensure that they are applied solely for peaceful and beneficial purposes. Fortunately, ethical standards established by the global chemistry community already provide a foundation. Building on that foundation, a group of experts from 24 countries from all regions of the world convened to define and harmonize key elements of ethical guidelines as they relate to chemical weapons based on existing codes.¹

Such codes are primary ways through which the community's ethical standards are addressed. The key elements presented in this text should be incorporated into new and existing codes in order to align with the provisions of the CWC. A code need not mention chemical weapons or the CWC to support its basic goals, and provisions may need to be tailored for particular sectors or circumstances, while still reflecting the fundamental values. Taken together, “The Hague Ethical Guidelines” provide the key elements that should be applied universally.

The key elements

- Core element: Achievements in the field of chemistry should be used to benefit humankind and protect the environment.
- Sustainability: Chemistry practitioners have a special responsibility for promoting and achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals of meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

- Education: Formal and informal educational providers, enterprise, industry, and civil society should cooperate to equip anybody working in chemistry and others with the necessary knowledge and tools to take responsibility for the benefit of humankind, the protection of the environment, and to ensure relevant and meaningful engagement with the general public.
- Awareness and engagement: Teachers, chemistry practitioners, and policy-makers should be aware of the multiple uses of chemicals, specifically their use as chemical weapons or their precursors. They should promote the peaceful applications of chemicals and work to prevent any misuse of chemicals, scientific knowledge, tools and technologies, and any harmful or unethical developments in research and innovation. They should disseminate relevant information about national and international laws, regulations, policies, and practices.
- Ethics: To adequately respond to societal challenges, education, research, and innovation must respect fundamental rights and apply the highest ethical standards. Ethics should be perceived as a way of ensuring high quality results in science.
- Safety and security: Chemistry practitioners should promote the beneficial applications, uses, and development of science and technology while encouraging and maintaining a strong culture of safety, health, and security.
- Accountability: Chemistry practitioners have a responsibility to ensure that chemicals, equipment, and facilities are protected against theft and diversion and are not used for illegal, harmful, or destructive purposes. These persons should be aware of applicable laws and regulations governing the manufacture and use of chemicals, and they should report any misuse of chemicals, scientific knowledge, equipment, and facilities to the relevant authorities
- Oversight: Chemistry practitioners who supervise others have the additional responsibility to ensure that chemicals, equipment, and facilities are not used by those persons for illegal, harmful, or destructive purposes
- Exchange of information: Chemistry practitioners should promote the exchange of scientific and technical information relating to the development and application of chemistry for peaceful purposes.

The complete text of *The Hague Ethical Guidelines* has been translated into all OPCW official languages and is available on the website of the OPCW.

The Hague Ethical Guidelines were formally announced to the CWC States Parties by the OPCW Director-General in his opening remarks to the 80th session of the Executive Council:

The Hague Ethical Guidelines have been made available on the OPCW public website. I encourage all States Parties to share the guidelines with their National Authorities, Ministries of Education, educational institutions, scientific communities and other stakeholders to advance understanding of the importance of nurturing responsible and ethical scientific development among chemistry professionals (OPCW 2015e).

Moving forward

The workshop participants extensively discussed the best ways to promote and disseminate *The Hague Ethical Guidelines*. For example, they recommended that the document could be usefully shared with all National Authorities of the CWC, education ministries in CWC States Parties, government agencies, and ministries responsible for the practice

of chemistry, scientific societies, and industrial (professional) associations. In reaching out to the scientific community, they suggested circulating the Guidelines by means of the many international or regional chemistry conferences that take place each year. In reaching out to industry, they suggested to share the Guidelines through the Responsible Care initiative and through conferences organized by industry organizations such as the International Council of Chemical Associations as well as any other national and regional affiliated industry organizations.

Building partnerships with international organizations with the mission to promote science would provide a further means to raise awareness of the Guidelines. Examples include UNESCO, The World Academy of Sciences, the International Union for Pure and Applied Chemistry, the American Chemical Society, the Royal Society of Chemistry, the European Association for the Chemical and Molecular Sciences, and other national, regional, or international chemistry societies. These kinds of activities will also enable *The Hague Ethical Guidelines* to make a significant contribution to the broader OPCW goals of using education and outreach as a tool to ensure that chemicals are only used for peaceful purposes.

Note

1. “Code” is used as a general term and includes the full range of such documents, from aspirational statements such as the Hippocratic Oath to codes that are enforceable, for example as part of a practitioner’s terms of employment.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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