

Ethics in healthcare

Associate Professor Christy Simpson of the Department of Bioethics at Dalhousie University, Canada, discusses bioethics and outlines the importance of ethics research and education in the University's medical school, as well as healthcare systems on a wider scale



A key phrase of the summation of the Department's Strategic Plan is a focus on 'ethics in and of practice'. Can you explain this within the context of your department and the wider healthcare community?

'Ethics in and of practice' captures our department's unifying interest in exploring what is 'right' or 'best' as we face difficult situations in healthcare systems and practice. We are interested in the types of questions and issues that arise in healthcare. We are also committed to working collaboratively on these matters and in translating ethics concepts and approaches into practical, useable and useful practices. At the same time, our research and educational endeavours are informed and shaped by what we learn about and in healthcare practice.

What current issues are being explored within the Department of Bioethics?

With our focus on 'ethics in and of practice', the range of issues that we are interested in is quite broad – from considering aspects of preferential access to care, to examining the ethical dimensions of complex healthcare practices, to exploring the organisational, policy and social contexts of ethics issues in a range of healthcare settings.

The Department of Bioethics is highly involved in designing, developing and delivering innovative integrated

undergraduate and postgraduate medical ethics education. Could you offer insight into these education programmes?

Dalhousie Medical School's undergraduate medical education (UGME) programme offers an integrated, case-based learning curriculum. Ethics is tightly integrated into the Professional Competencies unit in the pre-clinical years and in the Positioning – Integration – Evaluation – Research/Review (PIER) programme during clerkship.

The Professional Competencies unit is an innovative, two-year course in the pre-clerkship years that gives students the foundation they need to meet the challenges facing healthcare providers today. 64 cases across the two-year course focus on the integrated clinical application of core concepts in population health, ethics, law and evidence-based, and patient-centred clinical practice. Topics include end-of-life care planning, patient safety, and genetic testing.

Medical students may also undertake electives in bioethics and can complete a research project with faculty in our department as part of the Research in Medicine programme. We also work with the Dalhousie Medical School's postgraduate training programmes and programme directors to ensure they are meeting accreditation requirements in ethics education programme design and delivery.

How is the ethics-related professional development at Dalhousie Medical School facilitated by your numerous Ethics Collaborations?

With a commitment to supporting career-long learning opportunities in ethics, our department members participate in rounds, continuing medical education (CME) and continuing professional development (CPD) conferences and events, as well as other inter-professional educational events in the clinical setting. Our Ethics Collaborations further extend our ability to engage with a broad range of healthcare providers. This may be through the annual Nova Scotia Health Ethics Network (NSHEN) conference and the

Ethics Days hosted by health districts' ethics committees throughout the province, as well as delivery of several education sessions with different professional and inter-professional groups. On a regular basis, we also offer workshops on developing the capacity of ethics committee members and people interested in clinical ethics consultation, policy development and review and organisational ethics.

Could you discuss your healthcare collaborations with the Capital District Health Authority, IWK Health Centre and NSHEN? How are these collaborations advancing the field of ethics?

The Department's collaborations contribute to better patient care by enhancing the capacity of healthcare providers, leaders, government and community members to engage with the complex ethics issues that arise in healthcare. The collaborations further help ensure policies and processes are developed to address these ethics issues in a comprehensive, fair and equitable manner. The collaborations between the department and Capital Health (a regional health authority consisting of nine rural and urban-based healthcare facilities) and the IWK Health Centre (a maternal-paediatric tertiary-care hospital) provide access to ethics expertise and direct support for these health organisations. NSHEN, which began operations in January 2008, provides comprehensive ethics support and has substantially increased opportunities for networking and building ethics capacity across the province.

These Ethics Collaborations collectively help advance the field of ethics by enabling a unique perspective on the nature and types of healthcare-related ethics issues across one province and across rural-urban settings. By being able to gain, as well as provide, an ethics perspective at the levels of government to health district to boardroom to bedside, we can further contribute to an enhanced appreciation of the complexity, interconnections and real outcomes of decision making at all of these levels.

Applied bioethics

Bioethics seeks to explore the values embedded in an array of human issues. The Department of Bioethics at **Dalhousie University**, Canada, has been focusing on 'ethics in and of practice', working closely with health and governmental organisations

TRADITIONALLY, BIOETHICS IS the study of moral issues in the fields of healthcare, medical treatment and research. An often controversial branch of science, the term 'bioethics' can also be used to describe ethical problems in the life sciences and the dissemination of scarce medical resources. Much in this field is driven by advances in biology and medicine, which inspire debate around issues such as medical policies, practices and methods of research and testing. Bioethicists also explore questions that arise in the industries and fields relating to science and medicine, such as biotechnology, politics, law and philosophy. Finally, the field examines the more conventional questions of morals and values in primary care and medicine – otherwise known as 'ethics of the everyday'.

One of the key areas being studied by the Department of Bioethics at Dalhousie University, Canada, is 'ethics in and of practice'. This line of inquiry sees the researchers working closely with health and governmental organisations in order to lead, support, consult, research and teach about ethics in healthcare and the health system. Fundamentally, the research – and how its findings are shared and taught – is shaped by these collaborations, coupled with the Department's close ties with physicians in training and in practice.

BIOETHICS IN HEALTHCARE

Research lies at the heart of the Dalhousie Medical School. Its researchers pioneer better patient care and train new generations of health researchers. Medicine is the most research-intensive faculty at Dalhousie University – with annual funding of US \$68 million – and the school's growing reputation is attracting new scientists from across the world. These researchers will swell the ranks of what is already a strong research community, which includes health professionals alongside biomedical engineers, computer scientists, health economists and, crucially, bioethicists.

Associate Professor Christy Simpson is Head of the Department of Bioethics, and Ethics Collaborations Coordinator at Dalhousie. Her research interests include rural health ethics,



paediatric ethics, organisational ethics, and the role of hope in healthcare. For her, bioethics fundamentally engages with values – what is the (more) right action in our individual and collective lives. It also examines how structures and processes mediate and influence human actions and interactions – and as such, it has an important role to play in healthcare. “Bioethics can focus on everything from aspects of patient-healthcare provider interactions to decision making at the senior leadership level,” Simpson outlines. “Decisions about resource allocation, for example, may affect what care is provided for a broad range of patients and could potentially have implications in terms of equity and access for these patients.” Taking a broader, more theoretical perspective, bioethics can encourage healthcare professionals to examine some of the central tenets of their work, such as informed choice, privacy and confidentiality, and truth telling. It also looks at how assumptions about concepts like vulnerability and suffering fundamentally influence how decision makers assess the relative ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ of particular actions.

In short, the Department is helping to advance ethics in and of healthcare practice and to develop ethics capacity in various areas of health. Studying ethics in this context raises



Faculty of medicine buildings, Dalhousie University.

many challenging questions and issues, which are consequently explored in their teaching and scholarship programmes. It is clear how the phrase ‘ethics in and of practice’ motivates the Department as a whole.

LINES OF INVESTIGATION

The range of research topics the Department’s members address is broad but fundamentally connected by the focus on ‘ethics in and of practice’. Dr Lynette Reid is currently examining preferential access to healthcare and conceptions of equity. She also explores the appropriateness of interactions between physicians, the pharmaceutical industry and the nature of the social contract with physicians.

Under the clinical and organisational ethics umbrella, a handful of topics are studied, alongside challenging issues at the frontline of healthcare. Much of Dr Jeff Kirby’s research centres on exploring the ethics dimensions of complex healthcare practices, such as novel end-of-life practices, organ donation and transplantation, and fairness in the development and implementation of (pandemic) critical care triage protocols. Dr Marika Warren studies disability and bioethics, responsibility and health, and is currently examining uncertainty in the healthcare context. Simpson also studies the concept of hope in healthcare, addressing how healthcare providers can react morally to the emotions of others, such as patients, families and staff members. More recently, she has been exploring ethics from a rural health perspective.

Discussing the Department’s wider goals, Simpson explains: “We also engage in the ethics of policy development, the creation of ethics-informed decision-making frameworks and tools, and processes for deliberative engagement”. Cross-appointees with the Department, Drs Conrad Fernandez, Heather Castleden and Mary McNally are seeking to better inform public policy by gathering data concerning matters such as enhancing understanding of community-based research and returning research results to participants. Individuals within the department are also working with colleagues across the country on issues related to the professionalisation of practising Canadian healthcare ethicists.

PATIENT CARE

The field of bioethics can have an impact at every stage of patient care. Indeed, there are numerous ways that researchers are exploring and addressing ethics in relation to patient care. One example is the education and training of physicians and other healthcare providers. Simpson asks: “What ethics-related concepts and tools do these learners need to be able to identify and address ethics issues as they arise in the course of their training and eventual practice?” To explore this, members of the Department looked closely at the nature of the patient-provider relationship and asked what it really means to make an informed decision, seeing as such decisions can be an important part of a patient’s treatment. It is also important to account for the myriad other factors that influence what can and



Translation and application

A main focus of the Department is on the translation and application of ethics concepts, theories and knowledge to healthcare practice – though finding ways to translate such abstract concepts poses a real challenge. Translation, in this sense, can mean anything from teaching new ideas to designing tools that educate healthcare providers about ethics, as well as prepare and advise them on ethically sensitive situations they may face. Dr Christy Simpson outlines what they are doing to promote this growing field in practice:

"We have focused on developing targeted, ethics-informed, decision-making frameworks, such as for responsible partnering in healthcare – for example, public-private partnerships – and for disclosure of adverse events. We are currently working on a framework for balancing the duties to provide care and to provide a safe work environment. Other innovative initiatives have focused on developing an ethics tool for patients and families – the IWK Health Centre – and animated videos on topics such as informed choice, personal directives and privacy and confidentiality at Capital Health."

Studying ethics in this context raises many challenging questions and issues, which are consequently explored in the Department's teaching and scholarship programmes

should happen in such relationships – such as policy and larger organisational structures. For instance, directives on the disclosure of adverse events, and on who decides whether to use a life-sustaining treatment, all affect the type of care a patient receives – both directly and indirectly.

Another example is when healthcare professionals work alone or as part of a team. In both cases, it is important to know how core values are identified and adhered to, and how these values differ from individual to individual, team to team and professional to professional. Furthermore, department members seek to understand if professionals are comfortable advocating organisational values and whether professionals understand

and apply values in the same way. Department research on ethics education contributes to a broader understanding of these issues from a pedagogical perspective.

FUTURE STUDY

Simpson describes the Department's long-term objectives as being primarily the strengthening of relationships, both within the faculty and on a much wider scale, and as building an active, engaged bioethics community. "It is through these existing and new relationships that our ability to integrate and innovate in our ethics education and research is enhanced, and where we can contribute to issues of ethical importance in the practice of healthcare and inform future directions for our health system," she expounds.

Indeed, the chance to nurture the next generation of healthcare professionals drives this group. The Department has set goals to build upon its robust learning base. To help achieve these ambitions, they are currently seeking a new faculty member, who will contribute to and collaborate on ethics-related teaching and research. As with most ambitious research projects, however, these goals are not instantly achievable; the Department is also looking into new ways of funding its objectives, as it continues its invaluable work.

INTELLIGENCE

BIOETHICS

OBJECTIVES

The Department of Bioethics is an academic department in the Faculty of Medicine, Dalhousie University, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Its primary focus is to advance ethics in and of healthcare practice.

COLLABORATIONS

Capital District Health Authority and **IWK Health Centre**, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada • **Nova Scotia Health Ethics Network** (NSHEN), Canada – includes the provincial Department of Health and Wellness and all district health authorities • **Bermuda Hospital's Board Ethics Committee** (BHBECC), Hamilton, Bermuda

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Nova Scotia Department of Health and Wellness • Capital Health • IWK Health Centre • South Shore Health • South West Health • Cumberland Health Authority • Colchester-East Hants Health Authority • Annapolis Valley Health • Pictou Health Authority • Guysborough Antigonish Strait Health • Cape Breton Health Authority

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