MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

On February 25, 2017, a group of 13 of us departed for Quito, Ecuador. We spent four nights in the Andes and five nights in the Amazon, learning from local indigenous communities. We experienced healing ceremonies by traditionally trained shamans, learned about the medicinal properties of hundreds of plants, and participated in a sacred morning “cleansing” ritual with guayusa tea.

This is a trip that I have taken before, more than 20 years ago. Learning from the shamans is what initially piqued my interest in medicine, medical ethics, and the medical humanities. I saw inexplicable things happen when very sick people visited the shamans. People with chronic pain and life-threatening illness, who had exhausted what Western medicine could offer, found relief from symptoms and sometimes even complete cure from the ceremonial practices of the shamans. However, I have also seen the limits of what traditional medicine has to offer and the devastating impact of disease when there is no access to modern medicines. These experiences forced me to reconsider my understanding of “medicine” and “healing.” I became fascinated with the ancient stories of illness, the sacred healing practices, the intimate connection that the indigenous people maintain between the spiritual realm and the physical body, and how all of this could integrate with Western medicine to offer a more holistic approach to health and healing.

The Achuar tribe live deep in the Amazon jungle and were generally unaffected by outside contact until the early 1970s. Today, they welcome tourists to their land in an effort to preserve their environment and community. They appreciate what Western medicine has to offer. Yet, they also know that the wisdom of their people is an invaluable resource that needs to be preserved and shared.

It is one thing to read about the belief systems of ancient cultures, like the Achuar. It is quite another to take a “cultural plunge” into their way of life. Immersing oneself in another culture is a form of experiential learning that is thought to increase self-awareness and cultural sensitivity among educators as well as students. By “having direct contact with people who are culturally different from oneself in a real life setting” one gains insight not only into the “circumstances and characteristics of the focal community” but also into one’s own “values, biases, and affective responses.” (http://www.ribghe.org/580C86_L1_S2_William_Foley.pdf) This can enhance compassion and cultural competency, two essential virtues of medical professionalism and ethics.

The Achuar speak often of “Arutam” – a spiritual force that gives power and meaning to life. When an Achuar goes on a vision quest, the spirit of Arutam often appears as a jaguar, an anaconda, a volcano, or some of other powerful force of nature. The Arutam represents what the Achuar is most afraid of, but if he has the courage to touch it, it will give him the power to live his life’s purpose. Towards the end of our trip I asked our guide why the Achuar decided to partner with him to invite outsiders into their homes. “We are the jaguar,” he explained. “We are what they fear the most. In order to claim their Arutam and fulfill their life’s purpose, they needed to touch the jaguar.”

Since I have been home I have thought a lot about my own Arutam and the many ways that I can “touch the jaguar” in my own life, big and small. Writing about this trip is one of them. I have also thought about how we, as a community of health care professionals, concerned citizens, and educators can “touch the jaguar.” What can we learn from the Achuar and how can we collaborate with them to teach our students the virtues of medical ethics, to better care for our patients, and to heal ourselves?
**Ethics Track**

This spring, more than 325 students are actively engaged in ethics education through their participation in the Center’s Ethics Track. Check out some course highlights:

- **1st Year Course**: All first-year medical students, joined by additional students from the School of Allied Health, are enrolled in the Center’s Introduction to Medical Ethics course. The course covers a variety of challenging topics including confidentiality and privacy, futility and determination of death, and ethical issues in maternal-fetal medicine, transplantation, and pediatrics. In addition to lectures, students meet once a week in small groups led by 49 Center secondary faculty and members who facilitate a more in-depth discussion.

- **2nd Year Course**: The Seminar Series in Bioethics course concludes in April. Since last September, 54 students (the largest class ever) have been meeting monthly to discuss in greater depth many of the topics they learned about in their first-year course. This enrollment represents more than 25% of the entire second-year medical school class!

- **3rd Year Course**: The Introduction to Clinical Ethics course is currently holding one of its four yearly sessions. The students who are enrolled shadow members of the clinical ethics team and have class sessions to further enhance their ethics training and help them identify the topics for their capstone research projects.

- **4th Year Course**: 14 graduating students are currently working on their final research projects. They are exploring fascinating topics such as: rational suicide, triage systems in the ER during disasters, reporting human trafficking against patient wishes, and proxy decision makers for demented patients.

**Healthcare Policy & Management Track**

In preparation for the 2017-2018 academic year, Dr. Heidi Russell, Dr. Stephen Whitney, and Dr. Chris Scott are hard at work developing curriculum to enhance the first-year course and create a second-year seminar planned to debut in the fall. As part of this effort, they are utilizing best practices in education, including backwards design, as well as exploring new ways to incorporate technology into didactic teaching. Learn more about the Track.

**New Elective in Medical Humanities**

Dr. Andrew Childress created a new pre-clinical elective in the medical humanities to offer students an opportunity to learn how to identify and address patients’ psychosocial, spiritual, and existential needs. The aim of the course is to help students understand that being a healer requires more than just exceptional technical skill and is rooted in sympathy for the frailty of the human condition. Course assignments and readings in philosophy, history, literature, art, and film help students learn to approach their patients from a variety of perspectives. Course topics include: humanism and the creation of the self, the body in humanist thought, and humanism in the face of suffering.

**Ethics, Professionalism, and Policy Program (EP3)**

EP3 recently enrolled two new specialties for residency education: Dermatology and Physical Medicine & Rehab. These residents will now have resources and engaging discussions on important topics like Confidentiality, Social Media, and Cultural Competency. If you are a faculty member interested in becoming involved as a discussion facilitator for a specific specialty, please contact us.
PolicyWise Blog

Our faculty, scholars, and students continue to contribute a range of fascinating posts for the Center’s blog. Some of our most-viewed posts cover licensing CRISPR Patents to promote public interest, a student-authored post on dialysis care for undocumented immigrants, and healthcare market consolidation. Join the discussion today!

Health Policy Scholars

The Health Policy Scholars have been busy at work, publishing a variety of policy-related pieces in books, blogs, and scientific journals. The scholars are writing on diverse topics, ranging from manipulating human memory through reconsolidation to challenges to patient safety improvement research in the era of electronic health records. We are very proud of the impressive scholarship this group continues to produce. To see a selection of Health Policy Scholar publications, please visit our website.

Health Policy Speaker Series

On April 7th, The Health Policy Program will be welcoming Dr. Peter Bach, the Director of Memorial Sloan Kettering’s Center for Health Policy Outcomes. Dr. Bach is a physician, epidemiologist, researcher, and respected healthcare policy expert whose work focuses on the cost and value of anticancer drugs.

His talk will take place from 12-1pm in Kleberg Auditorium, located at One Baylor Plaza.

Dr. Bach’s talk is free and open to the public.
What is Advance Care Planning?

Check out this new resource that describes the purpose of eliciting and documenting people’s preferences for medical treatment, both in the end of life context and medical decision making well before the end of life.

Clinical Ethics Scholarship Spotlight

The Center values creating a meaningful connection between the work we do and the people whose lives are impacted by these important ethical questions. We are committed to building relationships with the community and starting a dialogue around these very issues.

**Register for the Decisions, Issues, and Values Affecting U (DIVA U) Speaker Series**

Through thought provoking lectures and discussions, U are invited to explore your own decisions, issues, and values in the context of the current complex medical ethics and health policy landscape. During each lunchtime session, a Center faculty member will present a relevant medical ethics dilemma. **Register today!**

On April 13, Dr. Christopher Scott will present “No Country for Old Men: Can You Stop What is Coming?” Aging research has a new face: longevity. Baby boomers are living longer and longer lives but are faced with the real possibility that some of those years will be spent in suffering decline. A quiver of solutions is proposed, including stem cell transplants, new gene therapy, and precision medicine. Where does the hyperbole stop and the evidence begin?

**Anna Deavere Smith’s Performance of Let Me Down Easy**

**Read** about the Center’s evening with Anna Deavere Smith that took place Jan. 17, 2017. Ms. Smith performed her riveting one-woman performance of Let Me Down Easy to a packed audience of 1,100 people at the Wortham Center in Houston, Texas.

**EVENT DETAILS**

*Journal Club*: Monthly, brown-bag lunch, open-forums available to anyone interested in attending.  **Subscribe to our email distribution list to learn more.**

*Grand Rounds*: Monthly events held at Houston Methodist Hospital (5-6p.m., Rio Grande Room) for their healthcare professionals, but are open to anyone interested in attending.
FELLOW SPOTLIGHT
Name: Peter Koch

**Professional interests:** Broadly speaking, I really enjoy the intersection of philosophy and the practical world. It is easy to get caught up in interesting philosophical problems without having the opportunity to address specific issues in society, but a fellowship in clinical ethics allows me to use philosophy to improve the lives of patients, families, and clinicians. For example, it is one thing to read and write about the ethics of withdrawing life-support, and another thing to discuss the same issues with a dying patient’s family.

**Educational background:** As an undergraduate at Loyola University in Maryland, I majored in materials engineering within a liberal arts education, after which I went on to earn my PhD in philosophy at SUNY Buffalo. People often comment that engineering and philosophy are completely unrelated fields, but I have found that the two disciplines complement one another very well. I think that knowledge of the physical world is made meaningful by philosophical questions, and that philosophical questions are given structure and limits by the physical world. To put it one way, scientists are just counting blades of grass without philosophers, and philosophers are just dreaming without scientists.

**A day in the life:** One of the best parts of the fellowship is the time allotted for both research and clinical service, and my days very much depend on whether I am involved in one or the other. On days of clinical work, I typically spend a lot of time walking between the hospital and the Center visiting patients, rounding in units, using hand sanitizer every fifteen minutes, and attending meetings with physicians and family members. During research weeks, I read and write on the many complex topics which have emerged during my experiences in the hospital. They form a good combination.

**Where you hope to be in 5 years:** Being a member of the Center has given me a great sense of what it means to be an engaged intellectual in an interdisciplinary environment, working alongside lawyers, physicians, social workers, chaplains, and more. Drawing on this experience, I can see myself continuing on as a socially-engaged researcher and academic, whether as a faculty member of a university or another academic institution. To be honest, though, as someone with a philosophy degree, I would just be happy to be employed.

Interested in Learning More About Our Faculty and Staff?
Visit our website for a full listing of our faculty, staff, scholars, and members!
Select Presentations


Select Publications


BLOGS ON BIOETHICS.NET

Read Dr. Blumenthal-Barby’s recent blog posts on Bioethics.net.

IN THE NEWS

Check out the latest hot topics in medical ethics and health policy capturing national public attention.
Awards and Recognition

Dr. Christopher Scott has been named the Dalton Tomlin Chair for Medical Ethics and Health Policy.

Prof. Courtenay Bruce has received the Fulbright & Jaworski L. L. P. Faculty Excellence Award in the category of Development of Enduring Educational Materials.

Dr. Amy McGuire received funding for two new grants as a subcontract PI. Brigham and Women’s Hospital Harvard Medical School (Robert Green, PI) will serve as the host site for the Enabling Personalized Medicine through Exome Sequencing in the U.S. Air Force (MilSeq) Project funded by the Department of Defense U.S. Air Force. The other grant funded by the National Human Genome Research Institute is a supplement to the Baylor-Hopkins Center for Mendelian Genomics (David Valle, PI) to develop an evidence-based and ethically-sound return of results policy framework for a family-based genome sequencing study.

Dr. Stephanie Morain recently received a year-long grant funded by the Texas Medical Center’s Grant Program in Collaborative Health Policy Research to conduct a multi-institutional health policy research project focusing on developing institutional policies about the issues surrounding Zika Virus. Her work will be disseminated through the Texas Medical Center, as well as through partners at the University of Miami. The project team includes Stephanie Morain (PI), Savitri Fedson, Courtenay Bruce, as well as secondary faculty members Jean Raphael and Joey Fisher.

Dr. Curtis E. Kennedy, secondary faculty member, has been promoted to Associate Professor in the Department of Pediatrics.

Dr. Anne Gill, secondary faculty member, recently published a post in Reflective MedEd.

Professor Jessica Roberts, a Health Policy Scholar and director of the University of Houston Law Center Health Law & Policy Institute, has joined Center Director Dr. Amy McGuire and fellow Health Policy Scholar Dr. Tim Garson on the TMC Health Policy Executive Advisory Committee. She brings deep knowledge in health law, disability law, and genetics and the law as a member of this esteemed group of experts.

Congratulations all!

UPCOMING EVENTS

Journal Club: April 6
Health Policy Speaker Series: April 7
DIVA U Speaker Series: April 13
Grand Rounds: May 17

DONATE

The Center for Medical Ethics and Health Policy researches and influences policy on today’s most pressing ethical issues, like what do about the Zika virus, stem cell therapies that can make you live longer, face transplants, the rights of Alzheimer’s patients, end of life decision making, and genetically designing babies. We are one of the biggest and fastest growing ethics centers in the country, and our goal is to build the infrastructure so that we can respond immediately to issues like these and help government and health care providers decide how to do the right thing. In order to accomplish this, we need your help. Please consider donating to the Center. Click here to learn more or contact us.