
UAMS Department of Medical Humanities and Bioethics Newsletter August 2025

From University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences <uamsonline@uams.edu>

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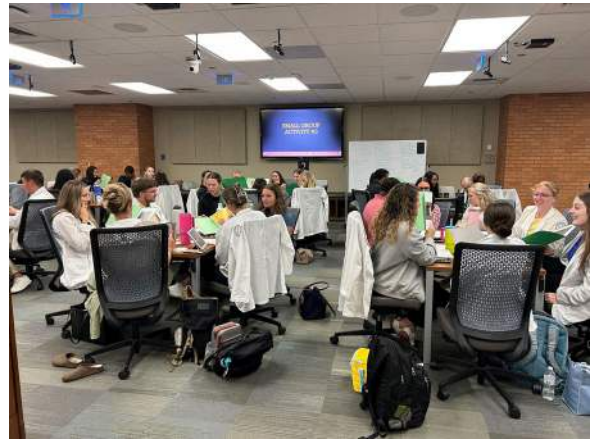
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August 2025

PA Student Ethics

June 10 marked the end of another successful ethics course led by department faculty for physician assistant students in the College of Health Professions. The UAMS Physician Assistant Master's Program has been around for over 12 years, and from the beginning ethics education has been fundamental to the curriculum. Starting with 26 students in 2013 and growing to as high as 40 now, the PA program produces top-quality professionals to help with the growing need for frontline healthcare.



Under the founding leadership of Patricia Kelley and now led by Edward Williams, the PA program included robust ethics content, offering multiple sessions of basic bioethics during the first year of PA education, followed by a six-week course on clinical ethics in May–June of the second year, and finishing up with ethics discussions at the end of most of the 10 clinical rotations that complete the PA program.

Students learn not only about basic ethical norms during the six-week course, but they also get the opportunity to hear from working clinical professionals about the ethical challenges that arise in surgery, women's health care, emergency medicine, genetics, and more. There is also a special session on the use of art observation and interpretation as a way for helping further develop students' clinical skills. Throughout their ethics education, students discuss and write-up analyses on clinical cases. In addition, they have the opportunity to share their own challenging experiences with patients and other professionals.

As the only ethics and humanities academic unit at UAMS, department faculty have long been willing to help provide ethics education across the enterprise, from its core education of medical students and housestaff to the PA student course, supporting genetic counselling students ethics, and even helping with pharmacy student ethics (see Catherine O'Brien's faculty profile in this issue). Please, let us know if there is any way we can provide ethics and humanities education anywhere across UAMS.

Upcoming Publications



Members of the Department continue to work on insightful scholarship on a number of topics in bioethics. Dr. Lauren Bunch has been hard at work on two papers about the concept and practical implications of “trust” in health care. She is also working with Dr. Catherine O’Brien (see her profile in this issue) on a paper conveying student reflections on pharmacy ethics.

Dr. Brandy Fox has submitted two manuscripts: one on polygenic risk scores for PTSD and another on the inadequacy of current suicide prevention efforts for veterans. Also, Dr. Fox and Dr. Micah Hester wrote a commentary on the ethics of making end-of-life decisions for unrepresented, incapacitated patients. Further, Dr. Hester completed a book chapter about what was lost with the “principlist” turn in bioethics in 1979 as well as a journal article about ethics of parental authority in pediatric decision making that will come out in the fall, and, together with Emma Chappell (undergraduate summer intern—learn more in this issue) they completed a journal commentary on the state of clinical ethics postdoctoral fellowships in the U.S.

Summer Intern

While the Department of Medical Humanities and Bioethics has no educational programs of its own, it has had a long history of hosting interns who have gone on to become professional bioethicists.

Probably our first intern, Lauren Sankary, after earning her law degree at Case Western Reserve and working as faculty for The Cleveland Clinic, is now running a brand new neuroethics program at UT Southwestern. Eleanor Gilmore-Szott was a Hendrix undergrad who went on to complete her doctorate in philosophy at the University of Utah. She later became faculty here at UAMS, and is now a clinical ethicist back in Utah. Corisa Rakestraw, an intern who was then working on her master’s in bioethics from Creighton, went on to do graduate work in medical humanities and clinical ethics at the University of Texas Medical Branch.

Our latest intern (funded generously by the Winthrop Rockefeller Cancer Institute) is **Emma Chappell**, undergraduate philosophy student at University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. Emma has been working hard to learn more about the life and work of clinical ethicists by going on rounds and attending consults. She has helped provided research assistance for faculty writing projects, and has even co-authored (with Dr. Micah Hester) a soon-to-be-published commentary in the *American Journal of Bioethics*. She is looking forward to her senior year in Fayetteville, and hopes to go to graduate school in philosophy, with an eye towards bioethics.



We are fortunate to have had Emma working with us this summer, but further still, we are proud of the informal program for interns we have been able to provide over the years, and look forward to continuing to offer internships as funding allows.

Faculty Profile: Catherine O'Brien, Pharm.D., M.A.

As part of our series profiling faculty, both primary and secondary, in the department, we present Catherine O'Brien, Pharm.D., M.A. (bioethics), as Associate Professor of Pharmacy Practice with a secondary appointment in Medical Humanities and Bioethics. Dr. O'Brien is a clinical pharmacist specializing in pulmonary diseases, specifically having worked at the Arkansas Cystic Fibrosis Center. After working in a research lab for six years and then completing her Pharm.D., she has subsequently been on faculty at UAMS for 17 years. Currently, she is Course Coordinator for the Pharmacy Law and Ethics and Principles of Pharmacy Practice II education of the pharmacy students.



She will continue to teach patient-centered communication and ethics in the new curriculum, which will be implemented this fall, as well as taking on some of the federal law content. If this is not enough, she also is the Director of the UAMS Teaching Certificate Program.

Dr. O'Brien has a bachelor's in chemistry from UALR, a Pharm.D. from UAMS, following that up with a PGY-1 residency at the UAMS Medical Center as well as a multidisciplinary fellowship at the UAMS College of Pharmacy. Just a few years back, though, Dr. O'Brien decided to expand her professional education by completing a masters in Bioethics and Health Policy from Loyola Chicago, which led her to become connected with the department. In leading pharmacy ethics education, Dr. O'Brien works with department faculty, as needed, and she has become engaged in the medical student honors in medical humanities track, as well.

Catherine is a thoughtful and inquisitive colleague who brings insights to bear from her professional experiences, helping expand the perspectives available to faculty and students alike. We are thrilled to have her as part of our extended department family.

A few thoughts on questions we posed:

Something you like about Little Rock/Central Arkansas: Its Goldilocks size and ample running trails

Something from where you lived in the past you wish we had here: Old castles

A talent you have or activity/hobby you like to do: Cold process soap-making

A book or movie you would recommend to a friend: Anything written by Michael Sandel

A book or movie you would tell anyone to avoid: Anything that promises the answer to having it all

A food or meal that you loved to eat when you were growing up: All of the fun 70s/early 80s dishes my mom brought to potlucks (like grasshopper pie made with creme de menthe)

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