
UAMS Medical Humanities and Bioethics Newsletter - May 2026

From Med Humanities <MedHumanities@uams.edu>

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Education



Almost from inception of the program in medical humanities at UAMS, we have offered an array of electives for fourth-year medical students that demonstrate the deep and important connections between various perspectives on the human condition and professional practice in health care. From courses that lean into literature, arts, history, philosophy, social sciences, and more, the full- and part-time, primary, and adjunct faculty in the Department help lead students through insights and concepts in vulnerability, death, culture, narrative, ethical norms, and

beyond. As highlighted in a previous newsletter, one of these courses is Arts & Medicine, where students experience, discuss, and analyze fine and performing arts over several weeks in the late summer/early fall. For this issue we would like to tell you more about our all-online fall offering of Medical Anthropology, taught by Shannon Avra (profiled elsewhere in this issue).

Medical Anthropology is a fully online course that runs August through November. For the past 3 years, medical students have been able to work with Ms. Avra and their fellow students through online video, email, and course-organizing software, like Blackboard. Medical Anthropology offers a unique and comparative approach that allows students to find the past in the present and to connect our genetic structure with shifting environmental factors. This connects to the humanities and ethics in ways that are applicable in medical practice. The students have been very complimentary of the course, pointing out such experiences and seeing a museum exhibit and completing a comic strip to help experience and express insightful aspects of medical culture.

Clinical



Another elective offering by the Department is our 2-week block course, Ethics of Clinical Practice. The course, limited to a small number of students, is intended to allow students with an interest in how clinical ethics works in a healthcare setting to spend dedicated time learning more about ethics, clinical norms, ethics consultations and committees, ethically relevant laws and policies, as well as specific case-based situations that arise during their time in the course. Students

spend some time every day for 2 weeks talking with faculty in our offices, and they also come along on rounds, sit in on meetings, and even listen in on consults, when available and appropriate to the situation. This year's student cohort is comprised of 3 students who all matched in Internal Medicine at institutions across the US, and they are looking forward to taking some new insights about clinical ethics with them to their residencies.

Faculty Profile: Shannon Avra, MA

Shannon Avra, MA, has been leading our M4 elective course on Medical Anthropology for the last 3 years. Shannon holds a master's degree in Anthropology from UA-Fayetteville, and since 2000, she has taught a variety of classes on campus and online, developed curriculum, and served in leadership roles at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, and is adjunct at Hendrix College. Shannon is a biocultural approach regarding health and disease/ human rights and medical practice/ poverty and infectious diseases/ biomedical Language and performative communication. She likes exciting, thought-provoking, and relevant classes with positive engagement and interaction through open and respectful dialogue. Critical thinking projects are central to her focus—such as community outreach proposals, connecting comic and picture books to larger socio-cultural and historical themes, and creating mock museum exhibits that highlight material and non-material medical culture through a variety of topics.

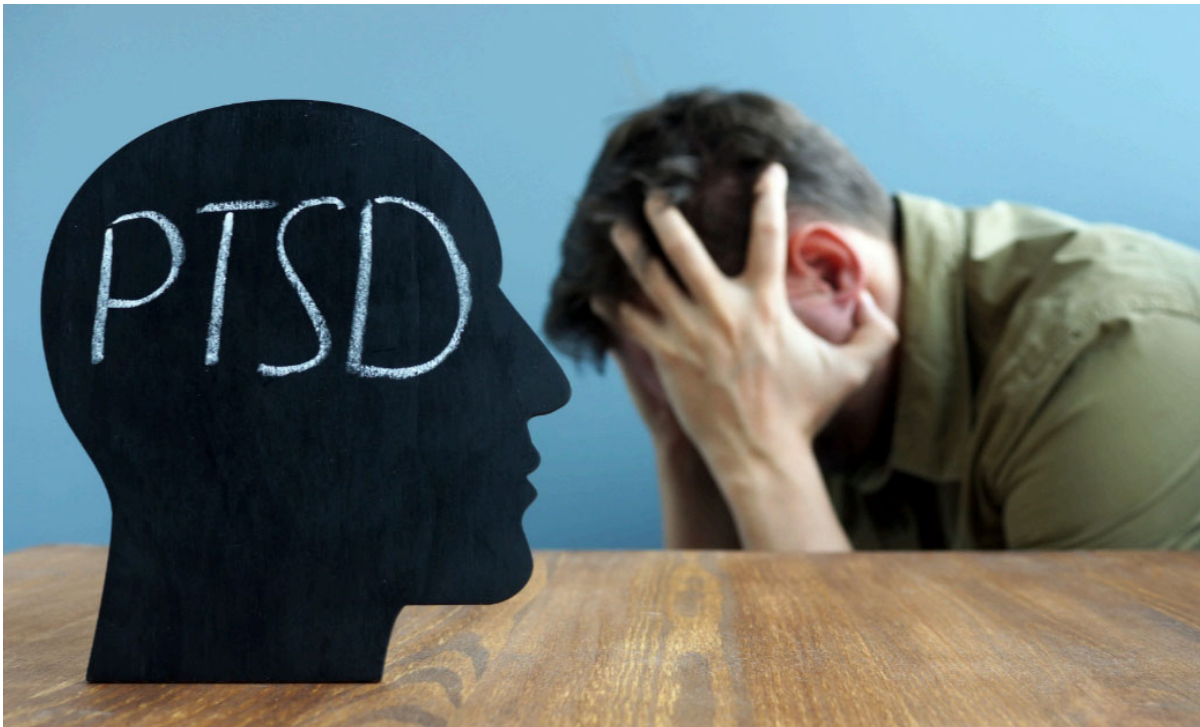
- **Something you like about Little Rock/Central Arkansas:** I love the accessibility to nature. The trails at Two Rivers and Pinnacle are favorites in my family.
- **Something from where you lived in the past you wish we had here:** An Onyx Coffee shop!
- **A talent you have or activity/hobby you like to do:** I enjoy writing and have a published picture book (2023) with a second book under contract. *Molly & Nightmare* is a picture book about friendship, loss, and the permanence of love. When we experience the death of a loved one, grief can feel insurmountable. But we can take the lessons we learned from that relationship and make someone else's life a little brighter.
- **A book you would recommend to a friend:** *Man's Search for Meaning* by Dr. Viktor Frankl is a book I have come back to throughout my life.



Scholarship and Research

We learned this month that Dr. Brandy Fox will have her paper, “‘It’s Not Deterministic and It Will Never Be Deterministic’: A Qualitative Study on Stakeholder Perspectives of Polygenic Risk Score Testing for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” published in *the American Journal of Medical Genetics Part B: Neuropsychiatric Genetics*. The study was completed as part of her Post-doctoral Research Fellowship in Ethical Legal and Social Implications (ELSI) funded by the National Human Genome Research Institute and completed at Stanford University School of Medicine.

To read the full article, follow this link: <http://doi.org/10.1002/ajmg.b.70018>



Per the Abstract: Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) causes significant mental and physical distress, yet only a small subset of individuals exposed to trauma develop the disorder. Scientists and clinicians are still unable to predict who will get the disorder or how it will manifest. Genetic factors contribute to PTSD risk, but integrating genetic findings into clinical practice has been challenging. Military veterans are especially impacted by PTSD and have different treatment outcomes when compared to civilians. Thus, genetic findings related to PTSD may be particularly valuable to this population. This qualitative study explored expectations and concerns regarding polygenic risk score (PRS) testing for PTSD risk among three stakeholder groups: military veterans diagnosed with PTSD, clinicians who treat veterans with PTSD, and researchers specializing in PTSD genetics. Through semi-structured interviews, I developed three themes that each conveys a unique aspect of how research participants conceptualize some potential avenues for pre-empting and living with PTSD, should PRS become widely available: 1. Controlling what you can; 2. The complexity of PTSD; 3. Potential risks for an increased emphasis on the genetic component of PTSD. Understanding stakeholder perspectives is crucial for

tailoring education efforts, anticipating ethical challenges, and facilitating the responsible, equitable integration of PRS into clinical settings in the future.

Honors in Medical Humanities Class of 2026

On May 15, 2026, the UAMS College of Medicine will have its Commencement ceremony, and this year 4 students will graduate with Honors in Medical Humanities; they are: **Safi Alsebai, Bennett Barr, Esther Park, and Kara Smeltzer**. These students began their journey in the track during their M1 year, have continued to work with humanities faculty mentors over the subsequent years, culminating in individual projects that use insights from arts and humanities to understand better culture and practice of health care. We are proud of their work and wish them the best as they move on to residency.

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