

Responsibility in Medicine

PHL2145H1S/2025

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Location: JHB 418
Time: Tuesdays 9am-12pm
Office Hours: Mondays 11am-1pm
and by appointment

Land acknowledgement

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

Course description

The concept of responsibility is rarely discussed explicitly in bioethics, and when it is, responsibility tends to be understood in a narrow way – to refer to the ‘personal responsibility’ that individuals bear for their health, for example. But clinical relationships (as well as the relationships that medical researchers bear to their study participants) are ones of mutual accountability, and judgments about a patient’s autonomy are central to medical decision-making. Because of these features of medical practice and research, it is worth examining how a broader conception of responsibility might enhance our understanding of what we owe to each other in medicine. This course would begin by discussing some canonical philosophical approaches to our social practices of holding one another responsible, which would inform subsequent discussion of responsibility in medicine along the following lines: What would it mean to be responsible for your health, and how does discussion of responsibility for health relate to social determinants of health? Should judgments about responsibility for health play a role in health care rationing? Is there a meaningful relationship between being responsible and having decisional capacity as it is currently understood? If not, should there be? When should someone be held responsible for medical error, and what should that look like? Finally, what does it mean to be a responsible medical researcher, particularly in the context of community-engaged research?

Communication

All readings, course materials, and announcements will be posted on Quercus. **If you need to contact me, please email me rather than using the Quercus Inbox system.** I’ll do my best to reply within 48 hours but will take time off from emails during weekends, holidays, and past office hours.

Evaluation

Participation (10%)

During the weekly class session we will discuss the assigned readings as well as topics that may have come up as you were preparing your reading journals. I expect all students to regularly contribute to the class discussion. There will also be a forum on the Quercus page if you would like to continue the class discussion there. Forum posts are optional but can add to your participation grade.

Reading journals (10%)

These reading journals are graded on thoughtful completion. **For each class period after the first, by 8am the morning of class, submit via Quercus a reading response containing two things:**

1. A passage from the readings for that class that you found particularly thought-provoking, along with a paragraph-long (4-7 sentence) explanation of why it resonated with you in that way.
2. A paragraph-long statement of a philosophical question that the readings raised for you, broadly connected to the course themes/content.

There are 10 class periods with new readings, but for the sake of not having an assignment due before the first class, you will be allowed to submit one reading journal at a time of your choosing. In total, you will be required to submit ten journal entries. Late journal entries will not be accepted, and uncompleted ones will not be excused, but you do not have to write journal entries for the last two class periods where we will have student presentations.

Short writing assignments (2 x 15%)

1. You will be required to write one short critical reflection piece (about 1,000 words) focused on readings prior to the Addiction and Responsibility unit.

Some examples of questions you might consider are: How do traditional philosophical treatments of responsibility relate to medical practice? Does it make sense to think of an individual as responsible for their health, and what implications (if any) should that have for the care they receive? How should policymakers factor in social and economic inequalities when considering the allocation of scarce resources? What are some criteria used to determine whether someone is competent to make their own medical decisions, and are those criteria appropriate? Why or why not?

This assignment is due by February 11.

2. The second writing assignment is focused on your individual project. You will be required to provide an abstract (about 1,000 words) and preliminary bibliography (at least 5 sources) for the final paper you intend to complete by the end of the year. It is okay if your project changes substantially as you continue to work on it (and this will not impact your grade on either assignment), but it will be helpful for you to be able to map out your argument and discuss the sources that you intend to use.

This assignment is due by March 11.

Final paper (50% - see breakdown below)

You are required to write a final essay (roughly 6000 words). You should be in touch with me to discuss the topic of your essay and preliminary bibliography ahead of time.

You will present the outline of your final paper by giving a 10-minute presentation to the classroom (15%), followed by a brief Q&A period (**on March 25 and April 1**). You will have then a chance to incorporate the feedback received in your final paper (35%), which is due by **April 22**.

Except for the oral presentation and participation component, all assignments will be submitted electronically through Quercus.

Important dates:

February 11: Last day to submit the first writing assignment

March 11: Last day to submit the second writing assignment

March 25 & April 1: Student presentations

April 22: Last day to submit the final paper

Late Work Policy

With the exception of the reading journals, I will provide a 24-hour extension (no questions asked!) if you contact me before a paper deadline and send me what you have written so far. Otherwise, late work will be graded down a third of a letter grade for each full day that it is late. In other words, if a paper were due on Monday, and you didn't contact me, handing in the paper on Tuesday would bring an A paper down to an A-, etc. **If you fall behind on work for this class for whatever reason, please come talk to me so that we can figure out a plan to help you get back on track.**

The University of Toronto is committed to equity, human rights, and respect for diversity. All members of the learning environment in this course should strive to create an atmosphere of mutual respect where all members of our community can express themselves, engage with each other, and respect one another's differences. U of T does not condone discrimination or harassment against any persons or communities.

Academic Integrity

Please be aware that it is your responsibility to know about and respect academic integrity principles. All suspected cases of academic dishonesty will be investigated following procedures outlined in the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters. If you have questions or concerns about what constitutes appropriate academic behaviour or appropriate research and citation methods, please reach out to me. Note that you are expected to seek out additional information on academic integrity from me or from other institutional resources (for example, [the University of Toronto website on Academic Integrity](#)). Normally, students will be required to submit their course essays to the University's plagiarism detection tool for a review of textual similarity and detection of possible plagiarism. In doing so, students will allow their essays to be included as source documents in the tool's reference database, where they will be used solely for the purpose of detecting plagiarism. The terms that apply to the University's use of this tool are described on the [Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation website](#).

Generative AI Use

You may use AI programs e.g., Microsoft Copilot to help generate ideas and brainstorm. However, you should know that the material generated by these programs may be inaccurate, incomplete, or otherwise problematic. You may not submit any work generated by an AI program as your own. If you include material generated by an AI program, it should be cited like any other reference material (with due consideration for the quality of the reference, which may be poor). Any plagiarism or other form of cheating will be dealt with severely under relevant University of Toronto Academic Integrity policies. Of course, there are many cases where I may not be able to tell if you cheated or not. Note however that, for any reason, including doubts about whether the paper was written with external help, any student can be required to come in for an oral examination on their paper. In such a case, a grade for the oral examination will replace the grade for the paper.

Accessibility, Accommodations, and Support

Please let me know how we can work together and set the class up to enable you to participate fully, access all materials, and succeed. I am happy to meet individually to talk about how I can best support your learning and engagement. Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. If you have a disability that may require accommodations, please feel free to approach me and/or the Accessibility Services Office. More information available [here](#).

The University provides academic accommodations for students with disabilities in accordance with the terms of the Ontario Human Rights Code. This occurs through a collaborative process that acknowledges a collective obligation to develop an accessible learning environment that both meets the needs of students and preserves the essential academic requirements of the University's courses and programs.

The University provides reasonable accommodation of the needs of students who observe religious holy days other than those already accommodated by ordinary scheduling and statutory holidays. Students have a responsibility to alert members of the teaching staff in a timely fashion to upcoming religious observances and anticipated absences and instructors will make every reasonable effort to avoid scheduling tests, examinations, or other compulsory activities at these times. Please reach out to me as early as possible to communicate any anticipated absences related to religious observances, and to discuss any possible related implications for course work.

The University strives to provide a family-friendly environment. You may wish to inform me if you are a student with family responsibilities. If you are a student parent or have family responsibilities, you also may wish to visit the [Family Care Office website](#).

Schedule and readings (subject to change):

1/7 & 1/14 – Responsibility in General, class introduction

- Susan Wolf – “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility”
- P.F. Strawson – “Freedom and Resentment”
- Iris Marion Young – selections from *Responsibility for Justice*

1/21 – Responsibility for Health

- D.B. Resnik – “Responsibility for Health: Personal, Social and Environmental”
- Daniel Wikler – “Personal and Social Responsibility for Health”
- Sarah E. Gollust and Julia Lynch – “Who Deserves Health Care? The Effects of Causal Attributions and Group Cues on Public Attitudes about Responsibility for Health Care Costs”

1/28 – Social Determinants of Health

- Paula Braveman & Laura Gottlieb – “The Social Determinants of Health: It’s Time to Consider the Causes of the Causes”
- L.M. Hunt and N.H. Arar - “An Analytical Framework for Contrasting Patient and Provider Views of the Process of Chronic Disease Management”
- Sarah Horton and Judith C. Barker - “Stigmatized Biologies: Examining the Cumulative Effects of Oral Health Disparities for Mexican American Farmworker Children”

2/4 – Health Care Rationing

- Leslie P. Scheunemann and Douglas B. White – “The Ethics and Reality of Rationing in Medicine”
- A.M. Buyx – “Personal Responsibility for Health as a Rationing Criterion: Why We Don’t Like It and Why Maybe We Should”

- Timothy W. Farrell, et. al - “AGS Position Statement: Resource Allocation Strategies and Age-Related Considerations in the COVID-19 Era and Beyond” and
- “Rationing Limited Healthcare Resources in the COVID-19 Era and Beyond: Ethical Considerations Regarding Older Adults”

2/11 – Medical Competence and Autonomy

- Priscilla Alderson, Katy Sutcliffe, and Katherine Curtis - “Children’s Competence to Consent to Medical Treatment”
- Alec Buchanan - “Mental Capacity, Legal Competence, and Consent to Treatment”
- R.L.P. Berghmans and G.A.M. Widdershoven - “Ethical Perspectives on Decision-Making Capacity and Consent for Treatment and Research”

2/18 – Reading week, no class

2/25 – Addiction and Responsibility

- Neil Levy - “Addiction, Autonomy, and Informed Consent: On and Off the Garden Path”
- Owen Flanagan - “Identity and Addiction”
- Kaveh Akbar - “Calling A Wolf A Wolf (Inpatient)”
- Larisa Svirsky - “Opioid Treatment Agreements and Patient Accountability”

3/4 – Shared Decision-Making

- Glyn Elwyn, et. al - “Shared Decision Making: A Model for Clinical Practice”
- France Légaré and Philippe Thompson-Leduc - “Twelve Myths about Shared Decision Making”
- Gert Olthuis, Carlo Leget, and Mieke Grypdonck - “Why Shared Decision Making Is Not Good Enough: Lessons from Patients”
- Rebecca S. Dresser and John A. Robertson - “Quality of Life and Non-Treatment Decisions for Incompetent Patients: A Critique of the Orthodox Approach”

3/11 – Malpractice and Medical Error

- Samuel Reis-Dennis - “Rehabilitating Blame”
- Devora Shapiro - “The Epistemology of Medical Error in an Intersectional World”
- Albert W. Wu - “Medical Error: The Second Victim”
- Ben Almassi - “Medical Error and Moral Repair”

3/18 – Responsible Medical Research

- James Flory and Ezekiel Emanuel - “Interventions to Improve Research Participants’ Understanding in Informed Consent for Research: A Systematic Review”
- Elizabeth Bromley, Lisa Mikesell, Felica Jones, and Dmitry Khodyakov - “From Subject to Participant: Ethics and the Evolving Role of Community in Health Research”
- David Wendler and Seema Shah - “Involving Communities in Deciding What Benefits They Receive in Multinational Research”

3/25 – Medicine in the Face of Uncertainty

- Susan Sontag – “Disease as Political Metaphor”
- Daniel Z. Buchman, Anita Ho, and Daniel S. Goldberg – “Investigating Trust, Expertise, and Epistemic Injustice in Chronic Pain”
- Travis N. Rieder – “Solving the Opioid Crisis Isn’t Just a Public Health Challenge – It’s a Bioethics Challenge”
- Arabella L. Simpkin and Richard M. Schwartzstein – “Tolerating Uncertainty – The Next Medical Revolution?”

In-class presentations - 3/25 & 4/1