Department of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine

Activities
Research
Team
Facilities
Collections and Exhibitions

www.egmed.uni-goettingen.de
medicine as a cultural and moral practice

Modern medicine, while resting on scientific foundations, is a cultural and moral practice. The interrelation between these different aspects, sometimes marked by tensions, forms the research focus of the Department of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine at the University Medical Center Göttingen. To shed light on this interrelation, we bring together philosophical, historical, social scientific, and cultural studies approaches. Many of the topics investigated, such as euthanasia, organ transplantation, and reproductive technologies, are subject of controversial debates. Our research also addresses more general questions concerning the philosophical and methodological foundations of medical science, such as the normative distinction between „health“ and „illness“. By combining theoretical and empirical perspectives, the department seeks to contribute to elucidating the presuppositions and social implications of modern medicine.
From the History of Medicine to Science Studies

Since its inception in 1961, the department has gradually expanded its focus from the history of medicine to science studies more broadly speaking, aiming at an interdisciplinary understanding of issues relevant to individual and social life alike. Today, many of our research projects seek to integrate aspects of the history, theory, and ethics of medicine.

With the appointment of Claudia Wiesemann as head of department in 1998, the University of Göttingen assumed a pioneering role in establishing the field of medical ethics at medical schools in Germany. As an institution of research and teaching and not least as an initiator of political debates, the department remains at the forefront of the professionalization of this newly evolving discipline.
Research

Researchers investigate biomedical dilemmas in relation to the concepts of health and illness, body and gender, life and death. The scope of these projects extends beyond a simple consideration of the historical and ethical aspects of the physician-patient relationship or the side-effects of progress in medical technology. Special emphasis is placed on empirical social sciences, social history, cultural studies, and intercultural comparison.

The department has attracted research funding from a variety of sources such as the European Commission (EU Framework Programme), the German Research Foundation (DFG), the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research, and the Volkswagen Foundation, establishing itself as a successful and internationally connected research institution.
internationally connected research institution

Due to the department’s international orientation and its special focus on the cultural context of ethical problems, inquiries attend in particular to the global dimension of medical ethics, for instance with respect to biobanks, reproductive medicine, and pharmaceutical research. Research projects are carried out in cooperation with with the University of California at Berkeley (United States), Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (Israel), the Centre for Research Ethics and Bioethics at Uppsala University (Sweden), the University of Lancaster (United Kingdom), Jawaharlal Nehru University Delhi (India), and many other European and non-European institutions.
Teaching

The department offers a broad range of courses, as well as research training and supervision, to approximately five hundred students and more than twenty doctoral students from a number of different disciplines. Supervision is offered for undergraduate and postgraduate theses and doctoral dissertations in bioethics, the history of science, human biology, and gender studies. Students of medicine and dental medicine enroll in our interdisciplinary courses in „History, Theory, and Ethics of Medicine“. Our aim is to acquaint students at all levels with the historical and ethical dimensions of medical practice, and to enable them to engage in critical reflection on these topics. Classes take a problem-centered, practical approach, with a special emphasis on case studies. To encourage active learning, students work in small groups and project teams. This ensures that even in the context of a sound theoretical education questions of application are never far from sight.
between science, politics and public discourse

Public Dialogue

Medical progress is a subject not only of expert discussion but also of critical public debate. Accelerating innovation in biomedical technology and the increasing complexity of biomedical knowledge are generating new questions and new possibilities for conflict. Given the considerable demand for public reflection on these matters, the department is committed to initiating and facilitating a wider public discourse. By bringing together laypeople and experts from various disciplines, we seek to increase social awareness while at the same time paying attention to the ways in which science is expected to be responsive to larger social concerns. Our activities include events such as readings and film series, which have elicited great interest beyond the university itself. At the intersection of science and direct participation, focus groups bring together laypeople and experts to approximate the ideal of an open discourse. Members of the department also serve as experts on medical ethics in a number of boards and panels, such as the German Ethics Council and the Ethics Commissions of the German Medical Association.
Responsibility and Trust

Autonomy and personal responsibility are highly cherished values in medicine. But new possibilities of disposing of one’s own body, an overabundance of practical options, and exposure to serious risks render the individuals involved insecure and highly vulnerable. Both patients and health professionals are faced with novel challenges regarding the selection and assessment of highly complex diagnostic and therapeutic information. A striking example is the case of individualized medicine, an innovative approach to medical therapy that imposes new burdens of decision-making on individuals and has a disturbing potential to generate social conflicts. At the same time, the functioning of a complex social system such as medicine requires trust in persons and trust in institutions. Several of our research projects examine the relation between autonomy and trust, for example in relation to reproductive medicine, the family, and the work of patient advocacy groups.
Giving Birth and Being Born

New technologies in the field of reproductive medicine, such as in-vitro fertilization and gamete donation, can have far-reaching consequences for intimate and familial relationships and can result in substantial changes in social roles. They contribute to the decoupling of procreation and sexuality and raise challenging questions concerning the ethical meaning of one’s biological origins, of kinship, and of parenting. An ever increasing degree of technological control over the process of childbirth calls for new efforts at providing ethical guidance, as do the emerging roles of mother and embryo as objects of scientific investigation. A number of researchers in the department analyze the fundamental shifts of perspective regarding reproduction and the family, searching for ethical categories adequate to these changes. Others study these processes from an historical perspective by drawing on the department’s large archival collection on the history of obstetrics. A permanent exhibition documents the beginnings of obstetrics as an academic discipline in the 18th century.
Ageing, Dying, and Death

In a technological age like ours, social attitudes towards death and dying are subject to dramatic changes. A broadening range of diagnostic, preventive, and therapeutic options leads to increases in life expectancy as well as in the quality of life in old age. But these options also harbor risks and a potential for new kinds of conflict. Research projects in the department focus on topics such as the construction of age as an illness and other processes of medicalization, the ethical quandaries of anti-ageing strategies, the fight against dementia, and decisions at the end of life.

Special emphasis is placed on intercultural comparison. The influence of cultural and religious traditions is investigated in projects on the history and ethics of the concept of death and on self-determination in end-of-life decision making, among others. Research results contribute to public debates about controversial topics such as the regulation of transplantation medicine and of euthanasia.
Doing Gender and Constructing Identities

Gender not only affects the way we understand reproductive rights and duties, it also influences how diseases are perceived and dealt with, and it shapes the roles of patients and their relatives. Current research projects in the department study the impact of gender in practical contexts such as living-organ donation and geriatric medicine; others address the meaning of sex and gender and the way their relationship is culturally and normatively constructed. Ethical studies on intersex offer a critical appraisal of how medicine contributes to shaping gendered identities and provide guidelines for an adequate response in the clinical setting.
Collecting, Measuring, Evaluating, Inventing

Within this research focus, projects aim to analyze how medicine conceives of human individuals and their bodies and how it investigates, records, and evaluates them. Their approach combines the history of science with the philosophy of medicine. The human body as the basic reference point for medical progress is exposed to the danger of being objectified, as well as to straightforward abuses of power. This is documented, for example, by studies on the history of obstetrics and, even more so, on medical practice under National Socialism in Göttingen University's psychiatric and surgical wards.

Other projects address the historical development of the medical concept of illness. They ask how notions of illness are shaped and constructed by new practices of measuring and counting, and what this implies for ethical analysis. The new diagnostic capacities of predictive medicine, for instance, give rise to a completely novel type of patient, those still “awaiting” their disease.

A further research group investigates new kinds of research infrastructure such as biobanks. The focus here is on the tensions between our duties towards individuals and towards society at large, and on the possibility of reconciling them.
Prof. Dr. med. Claudia Wiesemann

Head of Department
Medical Ethics and Medical History

When Claudia Wiesemann was appointed Director of the department in 1998, medical ethics was still an evolving field at medical schools in Germany. Since then, she has vitally contributed to the new discipline’s professionalization in research and teaching, has become a member of the German Ethics Council and of the German Medical Association’s Central Ethics Commission. From 2002 to 2012 she served as president of the Academy for Ethics in Medicine, the German professional association of medical ethics. In her research, she addresses the ethical aspects of reproduction, the family, and the moral status of the child. Recent publications focus on the consequences of transformations in social institutions and individual moral roles, paying special attention to the significance of autonomy and trust. She also works on the cultural history of brain death and of transplantation medicine, as well as on the history of medical innovation and the acceleration of knowledge cycles.
Prof. Dr. rer. nat. Silke Schicktanz

Bioethics and Science Studies
Silke Schicktanz was appointed to the University of Göttingen’s Chair for Culture and Ethics of Biomedicine in 2010. She is a member of the German Medical Association’s Standing Committee on Organ Transplantation and has served since 2009 as an expert reviewer for the European Research Council. Her international and interdisciplinary research activities have included stays at UC Berkeley, San Francisco State University, JNU Delhi, and Ben-Gurion University of the Negev in Beer Sheva. Her work examines the ethical aspects of modern biomedicine, especially from an intercultural perspective. A particular focus of her research is on the individual, social, and biopolitical implications of genetic diagnostics, organ transplantation, and geriatric medicine. She also works on the methodology of bioethics, especially on the relation between ethical judgment and the political participation of patients.

interdisciplinary research team

Research Team

The department’s interdisciplinary research team consists of about twenty researchers collaborating on a number of projects, partly funded by outside sources. Researchers come from a wide range of disciplines extending from medicine, biology, philosophy, and cultural anthropology to literary studies, sociology, political science, and history.
Other staff members manage our library, collections, exhibitions, and databases for literature on medical ethics, and coordinate research and teaching.
The department regularly hosts visiting scholars from both European and non-European countries.
cooperating institution

Academy for Ethics in Medicine – AEM

The Academy for Ethics in Medicine, the German professional association for medical ethics, is closely affiliated with the department, its head office being located in the same building. The AEM serves as an interdisciplinary forum for the academia and the public, and facilitates open debate of contested ethical questions in medicine and healthcare. Its members are healthcare professionals, philosophers, theologians, and legal scholars. The head office is led by PD Dr. Alfred Simon who is also engaged in the Department’s research and teaching activities.

www.aem-online.de

facilities | Academy for Ethics in Medicine - AEM
Library

The department library owns nearly twenty-five thousand volumes which, complemented by the holdings of the Academy for Ethics in Medicine, constitute a unique collection of works on the history, theory, and ethics of medicine. About one thousand volumes date from the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, among them a German translation, published in 1600, of the commentary on Dioscorides by the Italian physician and botanist Pietro Andrea Mattioli. In addition, abundant archival materials offer insights into the history of medicine, among them case histories from the Göttingen obstetric hospital in the years between 1792 and 1888, as well as admittance records, inventories, lists of provisions, correspondences, and hospital files.

Center for Information and Documentation on Ethics in Medicine - IDEM

Founded in 1992, the Center for Information and Documentation on Ethics in Medicine is a joint service of the Department of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine and the AEM. Under the direction of Claudia Wiesemann, the Center has carried out a series of international research projects aimed at improving the information infrastructure throughout Europe. It offers a wide range of information and consulting services both to researchers and to members of the wider public interested in medical ethics. This includes assistance with bibliographical research and with finding experts on ethical and legal questions. IDEM produces the freely available online literature databases ETHMED and EUROETHICS, hosted by the web portals DIMDI and Medpilot.

www.idem.uni-goettingen.de
objects of obstetric care in the 18th and 19th centuries

Collection and Exhibition on the History of Obstetrics

In 1751, the world’s first academic obstetrics hospital was opened in Göttingen. Due to this long tradition of obstetric science, the department of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine houses a significant collection of artefacts relating to the history of academic perinatal medicine, which feeds into a number of research projects on the social history of childbirth.

A scientifically curated exhibition displays and contextualizes objects from all areas of obstetric care in the 18th and 19th centuries, among them wax models of female anatomy, obstetric forceps, replicas of birthing chairs, and devices relating to puerperal nursing. The exhibition also addresses questions concerning the ethical justification of Cesarean section and feticide, questions that were especially pressing in earlier centuries.
plastic wax moulages of diseases

Collection and Exhibition of Medical Moulages

Wax models of the skin, also known as moulages, used to be important instruments of medical instruction and demonstration. The term „moulage“ derives from the French verb „mouler“, to mold. Wax models allow for the visually faithful replication of pathologically affected body parts or skin areas. They were used primarily by dermatologists and venereologists in 19th and early 20th century medicine. Göttingen’s moulage exhibition comprises around 80 well-preserved moulages and is one of the few remaining such collections in Germany. With its vivid representations of contemporary as well as historical diseases it offers surprisingly realistic visual material to historians of medicine.