"Health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."


Course Information

Meets: Internet Campus
Office Hours: Tuesdays 6:00 – 7:00 pm, Room FH 652, or by appointment in person or via Skype or phone
Contact: Email bstabile@gmu.edu, or office phone 703 993-8566

Course Description

This class will examine some of the most prominent and enduring ethical issues raised in medical and public health practice in nations around the world. It will take a comparative look at those issues through the application of various ethical frameworks, and an examination of various legal and policy solutions derived to deal with them. The classic principles of biomedical ethics as outlined by Beauchamp and Childress – respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence and justice – will help to guide our inquiry, as will consideration of several major schools of thought in political philosophy, including utilitarianism, libertarianism and communitarianism.

Learning Outcomes

- A familiarity with some important bioethical, ethical and philosophical frameworks pertinent to medical policy issues.
- An ability to approach common bioethical dilemmas in medical policy from a variety of philosophical viewpoints.
- An ability to write effective analyses applying bioethics to medical policy issues.
- An ability to give effective oral presentations regarding bioethics and medical policy.
- An appreciation of a multiplicity of ethical and legal viewpoints and policy solutions regarding some current medical issues in the global community.
Course Requirements/Evaluation

Participation: Weekly posts and dialogue 30%

2 Policy Briefs (7 pages each) 50%

Final Presentation – voice over power point 20%

See Appendices for descriptions of Participation requirements, and Policy Brief and Presentation guidelines.

A grade of A or A- indicates sustained excellence and outstanding performance on all aspects of the course. The grades of B and B+ denote mastery of the material and very good performance on all aspects of the course. The grade of B- is given for marginal quality work that is not quite up to graduate level standards. The grade of C denotes work that may be adequate for undergraduate performance, but is not acceptable at the graduate level. The grade of F denotes the failure to perform adequately on course assignments.

All written work is expected to be of the highest quality, representing both grammatically correct and carefully considered analysis. Elements of central importance to sound analysis include adequate depth, breadth, relevance and clarity of the concepts considered.

Assignments must be submitted on time to receive full credit.

Finally, all students are required to use their GMU email accounts or have GMU emails forwarded to their regular email accounts, as this will be the primary means of correspondence with students regarding the class. Even if you do not regularly use your GMU e-mail account, be sure to open it and place a forwarding address to the account that you regularly use so that you can get GMU and class announcements.

Required Readings

The required book is available in the George Mason University bookstore:


Other readings will be available online at the indicated web address, or via e-journals through the George Mason University library website at library.gmu.edu
Academic Integrity

Faculty in the Schar School have zero tolerance for academic dishonesty and will strictly enforce Mason’s honor code.

The Schar School Statement on Plagiarism, the University Honor Code, and some valuable Resources on Graduate Research and Writing are available at http://schar.gmu.edu/current-students/masters-advising/masters-101/topic-5-graduate-research-and-writing/

Citation Rule of Thumb

You are responsible for knowing how to properly cite referenced material. To be on the safe side, if you use more than three consecutive words of another author or speaker, put them in quotation marks and cite them. If you are citing five lines or more from another’s work, those lines should be single-spaced and indented. Plagiarism will automatically result in a grade of “F” for the assignment.

Plagiarism is using another’s words or ideas and representing them as your own. In this age of clicking, cutting and pasting, it is easier than ever to plagiarize (and to detect plagiarism), but it is as important as ever to respect the rights of owners and originators in the marketplace of ideas. The use of quotation marks and meticulous, proper citation will help you to avoid going astray.

Students with Special Needs

If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 993-2474. All academic accommodations must be arranged through the DRC.

Weekly Readings and Assignments

Session 1 (Week of January 22): Course Introduction and Overview

Required:


Session 2 (Week of January 29): Mental Health and Autonomy
The principle of self-governance runs deep in moral thought and law, whether it refers to the liberty of groups or individuals. At times, medical conditions affecting mental health may cause us to consider instances in which personal autonomy might be constrained through policy. Such constraints raise important issues of implementation, and how we might safeguard both public and individual wellbeing, and the principle of autonomy itself.

Required:


For further study:


Session 3 (Week of February 5): Helping Someone Die: Assisted Suicide, Euthanasia and the Principle of Nonmaleficence

Does Assisted Suicide constitute a violation of the principle of nonmaleficence – the Hippocratic Oath’s admonition to do no harm? Or does it constitute an act of compassion and afford autonomous individuals an opportunity to die with dignity? Few nations have legalized assisted suicide. What is the ethical basis of this outcome and what are the implications in medical practice?

Required:


For further study:

Drum, Kevin. 2016. “My Life to Leave: Assisted Suicide, My Family and Me,” Mother Jones January and February


Session 4 (Week of February 12): Obesity and Paternalism: Beneficence or Bureaucracy?

Should the government have a role in planning our meals? If children, or adults for that matter, are fat, is personal moral failure or systemic environmental change to blame? What policy responses have different nations in the international community devised in response to the burgeoning problem of obesity, and what is the ethical basis of such policies?

Required:


For further study:


Session 5 (Week of February 19): Justice and Access to Health Care

First Policy Brief Due

*Does justice require broad access to healthcare? Is there a minimum standard of care to which everyone has a right? How do different ethical and legal constructs contend with these questions?*

Required:


Session 6 (Week of February 26): Moral Character and Health Care Provision: From Conscientious Refusal to Exceptional Heroism

*Certain attributes of “Moral Character” as described by Beauchamp and Childress can help us consider the complexities of health care policy and provision. The “five focal virtues for health professionals” include “compassion, discernment, trustworthiness, integrity and conscientiousness.” While this latter virtue can at times lead to a refusal of care, what the authors describe as exceptional heroism leads some to offer care in extraordinary circumstances, such as the treatment of Ebola patients, which places providers at considerable personal risk.*

Required:


For further study:

Session 7 (Week of March 5): Moral Status and Reproductive Technology

How might we apply the concept of moral status, as defined by Beauchamp and Childress, to sort through contentious policies relating to embryos where personhood, abortion, infertility treatment and contraception are concerned?


Week of March 12: No Class - GMU Spring Break!

Session 8 (Week of March 19): Don’t Mess with Mother Nature? CRISPR and Genetic Modification

Required:


Session 9 (Week of March 26): Palliative Care and Hospice: The Quality of Death

Second Policy Brief Due

Modern medicine, which proffers many miraculous interventions, can nonetheless offer no antidote to death. What does it mean to die well? How is our experience of death influenced by varying medical practices, ethics and law?


For further study:


**Session 10 (Week of April 2): Ethical Codes and Practical Challenges in Clinical Trials**

*Despite the principles established in such foundational sources as the Nuremberg Code, the Declaration of Helsinki, and the Belmont Report, it seems that ethical dilemmas in the conduct of research are routinely raised. In particular, we’ll consider the conduct of clinical trials in routine and urgent circumstances.*

Required:


For further study:


**Session 11 (Week of April 9): Electronic Medical Records and Privacy**

*Technological advances in managing information may well improve the quality of medical care, but they also raise concerns of potential threats to patient privacy. What varying ethical and legal frameworks inform the proliferation of the use of electronic medical records around the world?*

Required:


**Session 12 (Week of April 16): Not Enough to Go Around: Triage and Rationing in Pandemics, Mass Casualty Incidents and Routine Medical Care**

Required:


**Session 13 (Week of April 23): Student Research Voice Over Power Point**
Appendix A: Participation

I. Class Participation and Professionalism

Participate meaningfully in discussion on the week’s topics. Respond to suggested prompts on the Discussion Board Weekly, and contribute meaningfully to the class dialogue by responding to posts of other students, and raising issues of interest related to the course readings and their application. Prepare by fully and actively reading the literature assigned for each session.

II. Current Event Policy Analysis

Over the course of the semester, each student must share at least one current event for class discussion, suggesting how the application of some specific aspect of one of the principles or theories we are studying might enlighten our thinking on an issue of current policy importance.

Each student will lead a brief discussion thread in which he or she will:

- Identify the policy issue and its parameters
- Provide a link for the article of interest
- Apply a specific element of analysis from the course readings to illuminate some facet of the policy dialogue
- Consider sharing the article via Twitter. Instructor is @bstabile1

III. Discussion Board Tips and Guidelines:

Each week, after doing the weekly readings and listening to the lectures/voice over power points, you should respond to the prompts posted in the Discussion Board for the week.

1. You should have one substantive post of several hundred words (equivalent to about one double-spaced page of text)
responding to the prompts for the week. You should respond to each prompt, but may decide to give more emphasis to one or another of them, depending on your interests.

2. You should also respond briefly but meaningfully to the main posts of two or three of your classmates.

3. Posts should be articulate and grammatical, but needn't be as formal as a regular written assignment. We want to try to capture some of the immediacy and collegiality of classroom conversation.

4. That being said, posts should involve some forethought and organization. They are meant to both demonstrate that you have read and internalized the main themes of the readings, and that you can apply them to some pertinent aspect of a policy issue of interest.

5. So, reference professional, personal or “current event” examples involving the reading concepts or policy issues at hand can serve to enrich your posts when used judiciously.

Appendix B: Policy Briefs and Presentations

Each student must write two policy briefs* of seven pages in length. Each brief will focus on a different principle of biomedical ethics: Respect for Autonomy; Nonmaleficence; Beneficence; or Justice, and will apply that principle as the framework of analysis to a particular health policy of interest (the specific policy must be cited) anywhere in the world. As part of the analysis, the brief should:

1. concisely characterize the principle at hand (referencing definitions or concepts from the text as appropriate),

2. identify the nation and its specific policy, noting its official title, date enacted, and any other pertinent details

3. offer a brief consideration of the treatment of the policy in the US or another nation for comparative purposes.

Each student will create a voice over power point presentation of his or her
favorite policy brief during one of the final two sessions of class. This presentation will be about 15 minutes in length. The goal is to have the essence of the central ethical and policy themes of each research project well conveyed to colleagues.

*Instructions for submission of policy briefs:

- double-spaced,
- 12 pt font,
- standard margins
- submit as an email attachment
- label with student last name, course number and brief number
- references required (APSA style)
- page count does not include references, which are required
- submit to instructor at bstabile@gmu.edu by the last day of the week in which it is due – so for the first brief, due during the week of February 19th, you actually have until midnight of February 25th to submit)