



Course Insights: Ethics & Philosophy of Medicine



Pete Young. *M.Bioethics, HFHEA*
Ethics & Philosophy Course Director
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To celebrate the launch of the Centre for Health Studies, Matthew Scudder, our Academic Training Officer, asks Pete Young, Ethics & Philosophy Course Director, for some unique insights about the course.

MS: Tell us a bit about yourself?

I am a part-time researcher at the Oxford's Ethox Centre and a part-time lecturer with an interest in medical education and ethics. I took my first philosophy course as an undergrad in 2010 and shortly thereafter joined the Master of Bioethics programme at UPenn in the US. That course of study introduced me to basic Western philosophical theory, but I soon learned that nothing in theory ever works out as expected in practice. Wanting to test new perspectives from my studies in a real-world environment, I took a research position at the Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics from 2015-2018, where I played a role in researching and delivering clinical ethics education to medical students, nurses, and junior doctors at Hopkins.

MS: How did you make your way to the UK?

I moved to the UK to continue my studies at a doctoral level in 2018. It was around that time that I met the former course director, Andrew Papanikitas, who invited me to join the philosophy course as an observer. The course certainly sparked an interest in me, as I kept showing up year after year. Eventually, Andrew decided to hand the course over to me!

The philosophy course is unique in terms of its breadth of lecturers and clientele; medical students learn alongside professors, some doing the course to enhance their work, others to survive their work (!) and others still as an intellectual challenge on a weekend or a retirement project. In recent years, we have seen many lawyers, sociologists, historians, and suitably interested non-clinician and non-academics do the course—all are welcome, subject to demonstration of interest on the application form.

MS: Share with us how you programme the courses?

The philosophy course spans western ethics and philosophy as applied to healthcare (with a heavy emphasis on medicine). The course is discussion based and has opportunities to develop and reflect on cases from personal practice and the media. We have particularly expanded the course in recent years to include some aspects of political philosophy and global ethics as well as learning-to-teach activities. In the latter category, one session is explicitly a symposium, where students have the opportunity to present original research. We also present a full day on the theme of medical ethics and human rights in the 20th century.

MS: What do you hope people will gain from taking these courses?

I hope that those who take the course will gain an appreciation of the richness of western philosophy applied to medicine and the values and reasoning that underpin healthcare. Some of these they may choose to challenge, others they may choose to adopt. Upon leaving the course, students will be more well-versed in ethics and philosophy and will have been exposed to the major stories and topics of interest in the field.

Importantly, the ethics and philosophy course and accompanying exam have been meticulously designed by leaders within UK bioethics and medical education to develop the skills to present an ethics case and discussion, to write an argumentative essay in the style of a BMJ viewpoint piece, or to present original research in a symposium-like venue. These are the metrics used in the real world to develop and disseminate ideas. So upon graduation, our students will be their own independent researchers set out into the world, able to identify ethical issues and attempt to set things straight. That is a lot of power to make change!