

Abstract: 2018 Elam Institutional Action Project

Project Title: Creating a Department of Medical Humanities and Ethics at Columbia University
Name and Institution: Rita Charon, MD, PhD, Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University

Collaborators/Mentors: Sandra Lee, PhD, Center for Ethics, Stanford; David Rothman, PhD, History, Columbia; Steven Shea, MD, MS, Senior Vic Dean, Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons

Topic Category (choose 1): Administration

Background, Significance of project:

Exponential advances in the basic and clinical sciences raise ethical and social questions regarding equity, justice, diversity, and access to health care. Deepening understandings of patients' lived experiences of illness afford fresh opportunities for learning about the human complexities inherent in health, illness, and death and improving the provision of person-centered care. Columbia University's medical school inaugurated a Department of Medical Humanities and Ethics in 2018 to address these ethical needs and to harvest these humanistic opportunities. I was appointed founding chair. My ELAM project is to create conditions for this new department that will empower it to fulfill its mission.

Purpose/Objectives:

1. Develop structures of collaboration from the ground up among the department's 3 divisions: ethics, narrative medicine, and professionalism & healthcare justice.
2. Cultivate arenas in which to provide humanities, ethics, and professionalism guidance and training for clinical, research, and educational units on the health sciences campus.
3. Develop consequential partnerships with Columbia University Arts & Sciences departments and centers that investigate questions of health care and illness.
4. Achieve visibility and leadership role in the national and international medical humanities and ethics movements.

Methods/Approach/Evaluation Strategy:

Guided by recent UK and US critical overviews of current challenges and best practices in medical humanities and ethics, my team and I have initiated the following strategic approaches:

1. Prioritize departmental initiatives that involve the three divisions.
2. Identify specific challenges/opportunities on the health sciences campus for ethics, professionalism, and humanities involvement and propose means for the department to address them.
3. Conduct needs assessment among medical school faculty for study in the humanities disciplines.
4. Enter leadership-level negotiations with pivotal Arts & Sciences departments and centers committed to medical humanities and ethics concerns.
5. Extend and deepen leadership role among medical humanities and ethics units in US and internationally.
6. Aggressively seek external and internal research funding and philanthropic support.

Results:

Research Funding: 2 R01 applications submitted for study of ethics of precision medicine; Phase 1 funding achieved for interprofessional research project on obesity; proposal submitted for narrative medicine projects in 4 countries; expansion funding for Physician Fellowship Program in Advocacy.

Columbia University Partnerships: Negotiations underway with prominent departments and centers in Arts and Sciences and the health sciences campus.

National and International Medical Humanities Partnerships: Active involvement with leadership of NEH, AAMC, National Academy Medicine, multiple domestic and international medical centers and societies.

Discussion/Conclusion with Statement of Impact/Potential Impact:

Our new department has achieved consensus and visibility regarding our mission, research agenda, and educational priorities. Vigorous funding efforts are in progress in the three divisions. Educational and leadership initiatives are underway to launch a visible, credible, and influential new voice for medical humanities and ethics in the US and beyond.