

History 3844G

Scandals and Tragedies: Controversial Medical Cases in History

Winter 2026

Instructor: **Professor Shelley McKellar**

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Office Hours: **Wednesdays 1:30 to 3:30 p.m.**

This is a **draft** outline. Please see the course site on OWL Brightspace for a final version.

Course Description

Using a case-based approach, this course tackles some thorny issues in the history of medicine. We shall attempt to make sense of several controversial events by exploring themes of risk, innovation, authority, the role of 'experts' and 'publics', health care access, issues of power, individual agency, experimentation, and more.

Prerequisite(s): [List any prerequisites here.]

None. This is a 2-hour weekly in-person class meeting.

Course Syllabus

Content & Expectations

This is a course in the history of modern Western medicine that focuses on past medical scandals and tragedies. To what extent have controversial medical cases in the past resulted in positive or negative changes for science, medicine, and society? Are some past medical cases 'more' scandalous or tragic than others, and if so, in what way?

Debate and controversy often surround developments in medicine and science, and even more so when fatal consequences and injustices occur. How best to understand controversial medical cases? Have past scandals and tragedies been genuine mistakes or media-fueled hysteria? Can medical mishaps be characterized as willful, even malicious, deception or unfortunate events for which specific actors should or should not be held accountable? What are the implications of controversial medical cases for science-society relations, medical practice, and individual health?

This course tackles some thorny issues in the history of medicine. We shall attempt to make sense of several controversial medical cases by highlighting themes of risk, innovation, and authority; the role of 'experts' and 'publics'; professional and state responsibilities; experimentation, decision-making and tactics employed; individual patient outcomes as well as health-related values of society, and more. We will ponder various questions, including do controversies end? Are there distinct victims and perpetrators in controversial medical cases? Are disputes or controversies over scientific concepts or medical treatments useful, perhaps necessary? How do changes in medical practice arise (or not) from past controversial cases?

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The course aims to engage students in critical thinking to address past medical controversies, broadly understood as any instance of disagreement around medical or scientific issues and practices. Employing historical sources and methodology, students will analyze select events, cases, and actors involved in various scandals and tragedies in medical history and trace how concerns, issues, conflicts, and arguments evolved over time. By studying these historical cases, we seek to overcome simplistic views of controversies as easily solvable debates between truth and falsehood or right and wrong. For example, we shall approach past controversies that involve actors inside and outside the medical and scientific communities, identifying the lack of consensus within groups, and analyzing the competing perspectives and agendas. The short- and long-term effects of these thorny issues shall be discussed. Aspects of class, race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality will be discussed alongside issues of power, individual agency, medical outcomes, experimentation, professional authority, and more.

Each week's meeting will start with a controversial medical case, which will serve as an entry point to explore a broader theme in the history of medicine. This is a mixed lecture (full class) and breakout sessions (small groups) course. This format allows us to explore various topics by providing relevant content and case information, by considering different historical interpretations and contrasting points of view, and by examining numerous methods and theories used by historians to gather and evaluate historical evidence. Students will engage with a variety of primary sources throughout this course towards 'thinking and practicing as a historian.'

Who can take this course?

This course is open to all students. Students in history, science, social sciences, health sciences, or arts and humanities are welcome. Students do not need a background in science, medicine, or history to take this course.

Course-Level Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this course, students shall be able:

- To identify several changes in healthcare research, practice, and policy that occurred as a result of specific controversial medical cases, noting various factors that have influenced change;
- To explain several key medical principles and concepts, such as informed consent, human body dignity, patient autonomy and self-determination, professional competence and responsibility;
- To recognize that medical knowledge and practice are shaped by time and place;
- To analyze critically various source materials – primary and secondary sources – from which to understand the history of medicine;
- To formulate and communicate an effective argument, which demonstrates good research, writing and analytical skills.

Refer to history outcomes and expectations for 3rd year students at:

https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/expectations_outcomes.html

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Methods of Evaluation

Please note that flexible due dates are offered for all work below. As such, with this intentional flexibility, requests for academic consideration for submission (including late penalty exemptions) of these assignments/quizzes may be denied (as per [Western's Senate's Policy on Academic Consideration](#)).

- Quiz #1 (online; open book) 20 %
Due date: 6:00 p.m. on Feb 4; Flexible until 6:00 p.m. on Feb 6
- Comparative Readings assignment (approx. 1000-1500 words) 15 %
Due date: 6:00 p.m. on Feb 11; Flexible until 6:00 p.m. on Feb 13
- Research Essay (approx. 2000-2500 words) 30 %
Due date: 6:00 p.m. on Mar 11; Flexible until 6:00 p.m. on Mar 13
- Quiz #2 (online; open book) 20 %
Due date: 6:00 p.m. on Mar 18; Flexible until 6:00 p.m. on Mar 20
- Participation (group break-out sessions; individual engagement in class) 15 %
Due date: Every class*

** Students earn participation grades for demonstrating aspects of “**thinking and practicing as a historian**” in group break-out sessions and individual engagement in class. There will be 10 in-class group breakout sessions during which students will participate in group peer-to-peer learning activities with marks earned from quality responses to CONTENT and ANALYSIS questions. Please note that students are expected to read IN ADVANCE of class the digitized material for scheduled group discussions. A group participation grade is awarded (not individual grades). Each student will accumulate a total of 10 group break-out session grades, of which the lowest 2 participation grades (including missed breakout sessions) will be dropped when calculating your final overall grade for participation. As such, with this intentional flexibility, requests for academic consideration for these participation breakout sessions may be denied (as per [Western's Senate's Policy on Academic Consideration](#)). Strong individual engagement in class may increase a student's overall participation grade.*

Assignments -- Assignment handouts are posted on the OWL Brightspace course site. Students will have some choice in assignment topics.

Submitting Your Course Work -- Students will complete quizzes online and submit digital copies of assignments via the OWL Brightspace course site. A **digital copy** of all assignments is required for grading. As per [Western Senate Academic Policy](#), “the last day of scheduled classes in any course will be the last day on which course assignments will be accepted for credit in a course”.

Late Penalties -- Penalty for late assignments is 2% each day (including Saturday and Sunday) after the due date. As per [Western Senate Academic Policy](#), course work cannot be submitted after the last day of scheduled classes in the term. Anyone seeking course work extensions and/or a late penalty exemption beyond the intentional flexibility already offered must request this through Academic Advising.

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Course Materials

All course material posted to OWL Brightspace <https://westernu.brightspace.com/>

Course Schedule and Readings

Week	Date	Topic and Case	Readings
1	Jan 7	Introduction – Tackling “Thorny Issues” through a Case-Based Approach	None.
2	Jan 14	Body Autonomy, Human Dissection and Medical Education Case #1 – The Burke and Hare Murders <i>Group Break-out Session #1 (read digitized material BEFORE class)</i>	Phill Jones, “The Deadly Business of Burke and Hare,” <i>History Magazine</i> (Nov 2008): 11-14. Susan E. Lederer and Susan C. Lawrence, “Rest in Pieces: Body Donation in Mid-Twentieth Century America,” <i>Bulletin of the History of Medicine</i> 96, 2 (Summer 2022): 151-181.
3	Jan 21	Quackery, Nostrums, and Health Frauds Case #2 – ‘Bile Beans for Biliousness’ <i>Group Break-out Session #2 (read digitized material BEFORE class)</i>	Lori Loeb, “British Patent Medicines: ‘Injurious Rubbish’?” <i>Nineteenth Century Studies</i> 13 (1999): 1-21. Erin Elizabeth Bramwell, “‘She Used to Doctor Us Up Herself’: Patent Medicines, Mothers, and Expertise in Early Twentieth-Century Britain,” <i>Twentieth Century British History</i> 31, 4 (Dec 2020): 555-578.
4	Jan 28	Eugenics and Compulsory Sterilization Case #3 – Buck v. Bell <i>Group Break-out Session #3 (read digitized material BEFORE class)</i>	Paul A. Lombardo, “Republicans, Democrats, & Doctors: The Lawmakers Who Wrote Sterilization Laws,” <i>Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics</i> 51, 1 (2023): 123-130. Erika Dyck, “Sterilization and Birth Control in the Shadow of Eugenics: Married, Middle-Class Women in Alberta, 1930-1960s,” <i>Canadian Bulletin of Medical History</i> 31, 1 (2014): 165-187.
5	Feb 4	Medical Drug Safety Case #4 – Thalidomide <i>Group Break-out Session #4 (read digitized material BEFORE class)</i>	Christine Chisholm, “The Curious Case of Thalidomide and the Absent Eugenic Clause in Canada’s Amended Abortion Law of 1969,” <i>Canadian Bulletin of Medical History</i> 33, 2 (Fall 2016): 493-516. Susanne M. Klausen and Julie Parle, “‘Are We Going to Stand By and Let These Children Come Into the World?’: The Impact of the ‘Thalidomide Disaster’ in

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			<p>South Africa, 1960-1977,” <i>Journal of South African Studies</i> 41, 4 (2015): 735-752.</p> <p>Online Quiz #1 opens 12:30 p.m. on Feb 4 -- Students responsible for material covered & assigned during classes of Jan 7, Jan 14, Jan 21, Jan 28, and Feb 4 inclusively; Due date for quiz completion: 6:00 p.m. on Feb 4; Flexible until 6:00 p.m. on Feb 6 *note intentional flexibility of deadline</p>
6	Feb 11	<p>Racism in Medicine and Public Health</p> <p>Case #5 – The Tuskegee Syphilis Study</p> <p><i>Group Break-out Session #5 (read digitized material BEFORE class)</i></p>	<p>TED Ed talk (5 min) at https://ed.ted.com/lessons/ugly-history-the-u-s-syphilis-experiment-susan-m-reverby</p> <p>James H. Jones and Susan M. Reverby, “50 Years After Tuskegee Revelations: Why Does the Mistrust Linger?” <i>American Journal of Public Health</i> 112, 11 (Nov 2022): 1538-1540.</p> <p>Comparative Readings assignment due 6:00 p.m. on Feb 11 -- Students to upload a digital copy of their assignment to OWL course site before 6:00 p.m. on Feb 13 to avoid late penalty *note intentional flexibility of deadline</p>
n/a	Feb 18	<p>Reading Week –</p> <p>NO CLASS MEETING</p>	None.
7	Feb 25	<p>Assisted Reproductive Technologies</p> <p>Case #6 – Louise Brown</p> <p><i>Group Break-out Session #6 (read digitized material BEFORE class)</i></p>	<p>Sarah Feber, Nicola Jane Marks, Vera Mackie, “Towards the Two 1978 Births,” [Ch 2] <i>IVF and Assisted Reproduction: A Global History</i> (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020): pp.27-70.</p> <p>Aditya Bharadwaj, “The Indian IVF saga: a contested history,” <i>Reproductive BioMedicine and Society Online</i> 2 (2016): 54-61.</p>
8	Mar 4	<p>Organ Transplantation</p> <p>Case #7 – Louis Washkansky (Denise Darvall), Philip Blaiberg (Clive Haupt), Joseph Klett (Bruce Tucker)</p> <p><i>Group Break-out Session #7 (read digitized material BEFORE class)</i></p>	<p>Shelley McKellar, “Clinical First—Christiaan Barnard’s Heart Transplantations,” <i>The New England Journal of Medicine</i> 377, 23 (2017): 2211-3.</p> <p>Susan Lederer, “Medicalizing Miscegenation: Transplantation and Race,” [Chapter 6] <i>Flesh and Blood: Organ Transplantation and Blood Transfusion in Twentieth Century America</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 165-184.</p>
9	Mar 11	<p>Patient Activism</p> <p>Case #8 – ACT UP Protests of the 1980s</p>	<p>Anna Blume, “Layers of Disaster” [interview] <i>The New Centennial Review</i> 21, 2 (Fall 2021): 27-43.</p>

		<p><i>* ACT UP is an abbreviation for AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power</i></p> <p><i>Group Break-out Session #8 (read digitized material <u>BEFORE</u> class)</i></p>	<p>Megan Hicks, “AIDS and Activism” [exhibit review] <i>Journal of the Australian & New Zealand Society for the History of Medicine</i> 15, 2 (2013): 112-118.</p> <p><u>Optional</u>: <i>United in Anger: A History of ACT UP</i> (ACT UP Oral History Project, 2012) 93 minutes - Kanopy</p> <p>Research Essay Assignment due 6:00 p.m. on Mar 11 -- Students to upload a digital copy of their assignment to OWL course site before 6:00 p.m. on Mar 13 to avoid late penalty <i>*note intentional flexibility of deadline</i></p>
10	Mar 18	<p>Public Health Crisis</p> <p>Case #9 – Canada’s Tainted-Blood Scandal</p> <p><i>Group Break-out Session #9 (read digitized material <u>BEFORE</u> class)</i></p>	<p>Michael Orsini, “The Politics of Naming, Blaming and Claiming: HIV, Hepatitis C and the Emergence of Blood Activism in Canada,” <i>Canadian Journal of Political Science</i> 35, 3 (Sept 2002): 475-498 * 1st section of article</p> <p>Marcia Martinho Costa, “Unspeakable: The Truth about HIV-tainted blood in Canada,” <i>The Lancet Infectious Diseases</i> 19 (Sept 2019): 942.</p> <p>Online Quiz #2 opens 12:30 p.m. on Mar 18 -- Students responsible for material covered & assigned during classes of Feb 11, Feb 25, Mar 4, Mar 11 and Mar 18 inclusively; Due date for quiz completion: 6:00 p.m. on Mar 18; Flexible until 6:00 p.m. on Mar 20. <i>*note intentional flexibility of deadline</i></p>
11	Mar 25	<p>Elective Surgery</p> <p>Case #10 – Breast Implant Controversy</p> <p><i>Group Break-out Session #10 (read digitized material <u>BEFORE</u> class)</i></p>	<p>Angela Powers, “Newspaper Coverage of the Breast Implant Controversy,” <i>Women & Health</i> 30,2 (2000): 83-98.</p> <p>Steven Dayan, “Revision Plastic Surgery Reality Television: What’s Good about <i>Botched</i>?” <i>JAMA</i> 319,21 (June 5, 2018): 2156-57.</p>
12	Apr 1	<p>Uncovering Historical Influences in Today’s Headlines – Connecting “Thorny Issues” past and present</p>	None.
13	Apr 8	Wrap Up	None.

Additional Statements

You may not make any use of generative AI tools, such as ChatGPT, in this course. Any use of such tools for assignments in this course may be considered a form of academic misconduct.

Please review the Department of History's shared policies and statements for all undergraduate courses at: https://history.uwo.ca/undergraduate/program_module_information/policies.html for important information regarding accessibility options, make-up exams, medical accommodations, health and wellness, academic integrity, plagiarism, and more.