

[Changing attitudes towards medical uncertainty at the research university from the 1880s](#)

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Call for Papers

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Finland

Subject Fields:

History of Science, Medicine, and Technology

Exploratory workshop funded by the Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (NOS-HS)

7-8 November 2019, University of Helsinki, Finland

Presentation

Even the continuously succeeding breakthroughs in medical science never will be able to take away uncertainty completely in clinical decision making and therapeutic treatments. The risks of an insufficient degree of tolerance of ambiguity are well known and therefore there is general agreement about the need of more attention for it in the curriculum. However, how to realise this ambition is much less clear. Our project, called "Changing attitudes towards medical uncertainty in the training of physicians" addresses this shortcoming, through a strong interdisciplinary approach, yet starting primarily from a historical orientation.

In this workshop we want to explore the history of changing attitudes towards medical uncertainty in the training of (primary care) physicians from the gradual introduction of the research university in the 1880s, when medicine increasingly came to be regarded as an 'objective' natural science. To what extent and in which way there was and is (still) room for 'medical uncertainty' during this development in the basic training of physicians, and how did these approaches develop due to changing circumstances and conditions in society? According to their professors, what kind of attitude future physicians had to adopt in the discussion between the extremes of a specialised focus on the disease and disease causation as opposed to a clear holistic approach, paying attention to the individual patient, to his or her entire medical and psychological background and to all sorts of factors of uncertainty? One option, which often has been tried out, was the introduction of courses on the 'encyclopaedia and history of medicine', following the example of leading German universities. However, to what extent and in which way these courses were indeed used to compensate for the increasing scientification of medical education in the laboratories is much less clear.

We encourage possible participants to focus their research on the different strategies of dealing with medical uncertainty in the basic training of future physicians, also by taking notice of the possible tensions between the pre-clinical stage of their education and the clinical phase. Most probably, for many students, hearing about this challenge in theoretical lessons was something completely

different than being confronted with it in a practical way at the bedside. Through a case study approach, interested scholars are supported to look for the specificities of the institutional, local, regional or national framework, preferably placing these discussions to some extent also in a transnational, comparative context.

Geographically the focus is on the Nordic countries, but not exclusively. On the one hand medical education in the Nordic countries generally followed a similar development as in other parts of Europe. On the other hand, however, the climate and the vast geographical expanse of a thinly populated region resulted in some common distinctive characteristics, such as an extensive medical training and a difficult transfer of medical knowledge from centre to periphery. Many of these well defined challenges are valid up to today. Against this background it is significant to investigate the possibly common attitudes towards medical uncertainty as part of the training of physicians in Northern Europe

Practical instructions

Proposals for presentations (approximately 400 words) should be submitted to Pieter Dhondt (pieter.dhondt@uef.fi), before the 15th of August 2019. Presentations must be no longer than 25 minutes, followed by 15 minutes discussion time.

All possible costs for the participants in the workshop (including travel and accommodation expenses) will be covered by funding from the Joint Committee for Nordic Research Councils for the Humanities and the Social Sciences (NOS-HS).

The results of the workshop will be submitted for publication as an edited volume in the series "History of Science and Medicine Library" of Brill (Leiden).

The workshop will be organised in collaboration with the International Commission for the History of Universities. Members of the commission are invited to participate in the conference with a presentation that fits the specific theme of the workshop or that, in a more general perspective, studies the question of how scholars have attempted to cope with uncertainty since the Scientific Revolution. Practically, parallel sessions will be organised focusing respectively on the theme of the workshop and on scientific uncertainty from a wider point of view, yet at the same time sufficient plenary events will be organised in order to create a community spirit among all the conference participants. Members of the commission have to take care of their own travel expenses.

Organising committee: Pieter Dhondt (University of Eastern Finland), Sari Aalto and Laura Kolbe (University of Helsinki)

Scientific committee: Pieter Dhondt (University of Eastern Finland), Eivind Engebretsen (University of Oslo), Anne Katrine Kleberg Hansen (University of Copenhagen), Peter Nilsson (Lund University)

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