

Call for papers

Ethnographies of disease stratification: Understanding novel clinical practices
and their social consequences in contemporary cancer care

Friday 12th April 2019
Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge

This one-day symposium will bring together academics from a range of disciplines to discuss how contemporary oncology is becoming reconfigured by the technoscientific promise of improved health outcomes for those affected by cancer. We invite abstract submissions from early career scholars using ethnographic approaches to understand the impacts of these discourses and practices on the stratification of cancer and patient experiences of illness. The symposium will facilitate networking and debate, and feature contributions from senior academics working in the field.

Background

The biomedical ability to target specific molecular features of tumours is driving clinical innovation towards more precise diagnoses and more effective treatments by way of “stratification”—that is, the process of dividing oncology populations into clinically meaningful subtypes based on molecular biomarkers. Treatment approaches such as immunotherapy have made significant gains with the discovery of these markers, reconfiguring local understandings and capacities for treatment, and therefore the “local biologies” of cancer (Lock et al, 2001).

While these innovations raise hopes for more effective treatments with fewer side effects, they provoke major dilemmas around individual and population-wide treatment decisions, equity of treatment access, and the social configurations of care. Ethnographic research shows that a focus on molecular markers to aid decision-making in oncology may also create forms of stratification which privilege specific patient profiles. Participation in cancer drug trials, which are becoming increasingly entwined with standard care practices (Cambrosio et al, 2018), tends to vary according to socio-demographic characteristics in the UK, and the ability to navigate stratified pathways requires health literacy not available to all. In this context, only some patients may be able to seek a better prognosis.

Current approaches in cancer care thus re-articulate forms of biological social stratification, with important implications for patient experience and survival. Only by unpacking the practices, hopes and dilemmas of multiple stakeholders can we begin to understand what is at stake for cancer patients in the production of new disease categories and treatment options.

Aims and scope of the workshop

This workshop seeks to examine contemporary practices of cancer care in the UK and unravel different forms of intended and unwanted stratification of patients affected by cancer. Drawing on ethnographic approaches to oncology, we will shed light on the developments and social effects of biomedical practices of stratification as they shape clinical spaces and cancer patienthood today. We ask: how do current practices of diagnosis and treatment in cancer care (re)articulate old and new forms of social stratification?

Through the use of ethnographic approaches to biomedicine, we will examine questions such as:

- How current practices of research and care are shaping local biologies of cancer
- How biomedical innovations in cancer care are currently shaping the landscapes of professional and lay caregiving.
- How patients and their support networks make sense of clinical innovations and the expectations imbued in novel treatments.
- What labour is required from the patients and their support networks to embrace and act upon the promise of novel treatments.
- How patient stratification, according to genetic phenotypes, is shaping patients' subjectivities.

Submitting your abstract

We invite paper contributions from post-fieldwork PhD students, post-doctoral researchers and other early career scholars using ethnographic approaches, from a range of disciplines. The organising committee will select successful papers based on clarity, quality and pertinence to the themes of the workshop. All researchers who submitted an abstract will be notified of the outcome of their submission.

Deadline for abstracts is **31st January 2018**. Please send your abstract (max 300 words) and a short biography (100 words) to Ignacia Arteaga at mia42@cam.ac.uk. Notifications of acceptance will be sent on 15th February 2018.

Participants will be asked to submit pre-circulation texts by 1st April 2019. These will be pre-circulated to all participants and each paper will be assigned to a senior scholar who is expert in the field who will act as discussant. Papers do not need to be finished articles, but can take the form of a think piece of up to 3,000 words.

Financial support

Thanks to the generous support from the Foundation for the Sociology of Health & Illness, bursaries are available to support travel costs of presenters.

Organising committee

- Dr Ignacia Arteaga (University of Cambridge)
- Dr Cinzia Greco (University of Manchester)
- Mr Henry Llewellyn (University College London)
- Dr Emily Ross (University of Edinburgh)
- Dr Julia Swallow (University of Leeds)