

Medical ethics under Nazism

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Did Nazi-era physicians study medical ethics? Does the concept of medical ethics exist independently of political systems? These were the questions driving Dr. Florian Bruns of Charité - Universitätsmedizin Berlin and Dr. Tessa Chelouche from the University of Haifa in Israel when they embarked on their recent collaboration. Their study, *Lectures on Inhumanity: Teaching Medical Ethics in German Medical Schools Under Nazism*, has been published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

Today, we find it virtually inconceivable that physicians under the Nazi regime should have been discussing or studying medical ethics. However, using archived historical documents, this is precisely what the two researchers were able to confirm. 1939 saw the introduction of mandatory lectures on medical ethics at all German universities, including at the Berlin Faculty of Medicine.

The aim of these lectures was for future physicians to gain an understanding of the ethical and [moral values](#) underpinning Nazi [medicine](#). These included the notion of human beings having unequal 'worth', and the assumption that the health of the 'people's body' (i.e. the community) is always more important than that of the individual. The authoritarian role of the [physician](#), the exclusion of all alien 'races', and the individual's obligation to stay healthy also counted among the moral values imparted as part of these lectures. Physicians who were early members of the Nazi Party, and thus considered ideologically reliable, were chosen to deliver these lectures.

"Our research shows that [medical ethics](#) is merely a reflection of the

current societal zeitgeist, and that humane principles do not constitute a universal construct that can be taken for granted. Rather, it must be constantly renegotiated and defended," says Dr. Florian Bruns of Charité's Institute for the History of Medicine and Medical Ethics.

The project entitled 'GeDenkOrt.Charité - Responsibility in Science' (GeDenkOrt.Charité - Wissenschaft in Verantwortung) addresses this challenge. The aim of this project is to encourage students and physicians to become aware of, and remain vigilant against, threats to ethical principles within the biomedical sciences and technology and, above all, to commit to upholding the principles of professional conduct in medical practice, research and teaching. In 2015, Charité also created the first Chair in Medical Humanities in Germany.

More information: Florian Bruns et al, Lectures on Inhumanity: Teaching Medical Ethics in German Medical Schools Under Nazism, *Annals of Internal Medicine* (2017). [DOI: 10.7326/M16-2758](https://doi.org/10.7326/M16-2758)

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