



The Ethics of Health Communication Conference



Tuesday 24th - Wednesday 25th Jun 2025

The British Academy, London

In partnership with:



Conference Summary

British Academy/Wellcome Trust Conferences bring together scholars and specialists from around the world to explore themes related to health and wellbeing.

Health care and medicine are technical disciplines. However, they demand effective communication with those who are not experts in the relevant

technical areas: patients, families, politicians, and the general public. Health care workers, public health professionals, health economists and other health professionals are thus often confronted with circumstances demanding communication skills, often where ineffective communication can lead to serious consequences. Examples where communication is key in healthcare contexts include how public health officials should communicate risk to public audiences, how doctors should communicate uncertainty to patients, when and whether it is appropriate for medical professionals to raise ethical issues with patients, how medical students should be taught to communicate, the use of inclusive language in maternity services, and the role of communication in the democratisation of healthcare decision-making, for instance through Patient and Public Involvement.

This conference brings together a variety of speakers working at the intersection of philosophical ethics and health practice, to engage with a range of ethical and political issues that can arise in the context of communicating about health and health care.

Conference Convenors

- **Dr Ben Davies, University of Sheffield**

Speakers

- **Dr Teresa Baron**, University of Nottingham
- **Professor Ruth Bromley**, University of Manchester
- **Dr Rebecca Brown**, Uehiro Oxford Institute
- **Dr Ben Davies**, University of Sheffield
- **Dr Hugh Desmond**, Wageningen University
- **Greg Fell**, President of UK Association of Directors of Public Health
- **Dr Lisa Forsberg**, Uehiro Oxford Institute
- **Dr Zoë Fritz**, University of Cambridge
- **Dr Katherine Furman**, University of Liverpool
- **Dr Jules Holroyd**, University of Sheffield
- **Dr Harleen Johal**, University of Bristol
- **Dr Joshua Parker**, Lancaster University
- **Dr Alfred Moore**, University of York
- **Dr Clare Moriarty**, Trinity College Dublin

Chairs

- **Joe Holmes**, University of Sheffield
- **Charlie Potter**, University of Sheffield

Schedule

Day 1

- 9:15-9:50 Registration
- 9:50-10:00 Welcome
- 10:00-12:00 Pregnancy, childbirth, and feeding
- 12:00-13:30 Lunch
- 13:30-15:30 Communicating uncertainty
- 15:30-16:00 Coffee/Tea Break
- 16:00-17:00 Contentious communication
- 17:30-19:00 Reception & refreshments

Day 2

- 9:15-10:00 Registration
- 10:00-12:00 Communicating health and the public
- 12:00-13:30 Lunch
- 13:30-15:30 Trust
- 15:30-16:00 Closing remarks

Session 1: Pregnancy, feeding and childbirth

24th June, 10:00-12:00
SHAPE Room

Having children is a period when good communication from health care professionals is crucial. Ethical issues arise at every stage of becoming a parent at both an individual and national level. General communication, for instance on websites or in pamphlet, can struggle to speak inclusively about patients who are pregnant, birthing or parents. There is also a great deal of moral and moralised language directed at parents, especially mothers, concerning both the health and well-being of their child (e.g., in recommendations to breastfeed) or more generally (e.g., in considerations around the environmental impact of various forms of care. This session involves talks on inclusive language in perinatal and postnatal care, the science and ethics of recommendations on feeding, and the ethics of bringing moral issues into birthing plans.

Chair: Ben Davies

Speakers:

- Dr Jules Holroyd - *University of Sheffield*
 - Dr Clare Moriarty – *Trinity College, Dublin*
 - Dr Joshua Parker – *University of Lancaster*
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24th June, 12:00-13:30 Lunch

Wohl Gallery

Session 2: Communicating uncertainty

24th June, 13:30-15:30

SHAPE Room

Much of the subject matter communicated in medicine and health is uncertain. Diagnoses are doubtful, various options can each come with risks, and public health discussions may be interpreted in radically different ways depending on the audience receiving the communication. Healthcare and public health professionals have a duty of honesty and candour when it comes to their communications; but do they have obligations beyond this? And what about obligations on the part of patients or the public? Should professionals aim to offer reassurance and clarity, even at the cost of masking a degree of uncertainty? Talks in this session consider communicating risks in three quite different contexts: public health, neonatal intensive care, and more standard clinical diagnosis.

Chair: Joseph Holmes - *University of Sheffield*

Speakers:

- Dr Teresa Baron - *University of Nottingham*
 - Dr Rebecca Brown – *Uehiro Oxford Institute*
 - Dr Zoë Fritz – *University of Cambridge*
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24th June, 15:30–16:00 Break

Wohl Galley

Session 3: Contentious communication

24th June, 16:00-17:30

SHAPE Room

Communication inevitably occurs within various forms of relationships, many of which involve power dynamics that raise their own ethical concerns. When people communicate in health contexts, one central goal is the transfer of information. But communication is used for a variety of other purposes. Sometimes we communicate because we want to persuade, or even manipulate, another individual into doing what we want or what we think is best for them. Communication can involve coming to a consensus; but it can also involve expressing views that ultimately cannot be reconciled, and this can lead to conflict within medical teams, between medical professionals and patients, and even in legal settings. This session involves talks concerning two contentious forms of communication: “motivational interviewing”, a form of person-based counselling that has been criticised as manipulation, and communicating during conflicts over critical care decisions.

Chair: Charlie Potter – *University of Sheffield*

Speakers:

- Dr Lisa Forsberg – *Uehiro Oxford Institute*
- Dr Harleen Johal – *University of Bristol*

24th June, 17:30– Reception
Wohl Gallery

Day 2

Session 4: Communication health and the public

25th June, 10:00–12:00
SHAPE Room

Public health has been accused of overstepping its bounds into politics, of advocating a “nanny state”, and of being removed from the priorities of ordinary people. Yet public health practice has seen significant advances in protecting and preserving the health of individuals and groups. The practice of public health is not the only way that the public may be involved in communicating *about* health. Many decisions made at national, regional and even local levels involve subsections patients and the public in some capacity. One purported reason for this involvement is to make health practice, such as resource allocation, more “democratic”. But there are significant questions about whether current ways of involving people are genuinely democratic, and whether a democratic health service is genuinely desirable. This session will include talks from two senior professionals with experience of public-facing

health decision-making: former Chair of Manchester Health & Care Commissioning Professor Ruth Bromley, and President of the UK Association of Directors of Public Health Greg Fell, as well as a talk on making health communication and decision-making more democratic.

Chair: Clare Moriarty

Speakers:

- Professor Ruth Bromley – *University of Manchester*
- Dr Ben Davies – *University of Sheffield*
- Greg Fell – *President, UK Association of Directors of Public Health*

25th June, 12:00-13:30 Lunch

Wohl Gallery

Session 5: Trust

25th June, 13:30–15:30

SHAPE Room

One of the key ethical issues in, and facilitators of, health communication is trust. Much health communication involves various forms of expertise—from patients' lived experience, from academic or practical education, and so on—being communicated to others. But to receive expertise *as* expertise, the audience needs to have a level of trust in those who are communicating with them. This raises various ethical questions: How can we get people to trust experts? How should health information be communicated in contexts where there are high levels of *distrust*, in experts, the state, and other sources of authority? What role should experts play in advising, and how do they avoid stepping beyond their bounds? This session involves three talks on the communication of expertise and its relationship with trust.

Chair: Jules Holroyd

Speakers:

- Dr Hugh Desmond – *Wageningen University*
- Dr Katherine Furman – *University of Liverpool*
- Dr Alfred Moore – *University of York*

25th June, 15:30-16:00 Closing remarks

SHAPE Room
