

Sarah Gwynne enthuses about a new opportunity

Special study modules in Christian medical ethics

Imagine if *Christian* students were allowed to study *Christian* medical ethics at *medical school*! Five medical schools around the UK are doing just that, running special study modules (SSMs) in medical ethics from a Christian perspective.

To date there are courses running for between two and eight weeks in Birmingham, Cardiff, Leicester, Newcastle and Oxford. In Cardiff we ran our first SSM in 2007 and we want to encourage others to consider doing the same.

What are SSMs?

SSMs, also known as student selected components (SSCs), are increasingly a part of the UK medical curriculum. They give students opportunity to study areas of medicine that are of personal interest to them. Some CMF members have grasped this opportunity to teach medical ethics from a Christian perspective in an SSM.

How did I get involved?

After hearing about SSMs in other medical schools I wondered if we could do the same in Cardiff. Local CMF students were overwhelmingly positive about the idea.

SSMs can be started either by a tutor submitting a proposal (as I did) or by students making their own requests.

What did we cover?

We looked at the theoretical basis of ethics from secular and biblical perspectives. We then covered specific topics such as abortion, euthanasia, brainstem death, conscientious objection and the Mental Capacity Act.

Students had two or three tutorials a week with the rest of the time spent researching a chosen topic. These included end of life issues, abortion, circumcision, and the human papilloma virus vaccine. Topics were written up for assessment and at the end of the eight weeks each student made a presentation to the group. They were also encouraged to arrange a clinical placement in a relevant area, such as a genitourinary medicine clinic, pregnancy advice centre or hospice.

Is it worth it?

I'll let Hannah, one of our students, answer that one.

What did you enjoy most about the SSM?

I loved all aspects of it! In particular the overt opportunity to intertwine my Christian values and beliefs with my degree. It was fascinating and intriguing to discuss issues I had never even considered before.

What topic did you choose to study in more detail?

I chose physician-assisted suicide (PAS) and spent a day in a local hospice; it was an amazing experience. I was inspired by the positive effects of good palliative care and by the potential to show Christ-like love and compassion to patients at this precious time of life. Spurred on by this and the recent Joffe Bill, which attempted to introduce PAS into England and Wales, I explored the existing situation in Oregon where PAS is legal, the potentially detrimental effects of its legalisation here,

Who did the teaching?

In Cardiff we shared out the teaching between CMF staff and local doctors. On the whole people were very happy to be involved; some teaching for the first time. Becky McGee, a Cardiff GP, shares her experience...

Initially I was a bit apprehensive at the prospect of leading a student seminar on abortion – especially when I was sandwiched between Peter Saunders and a consultant paediatrician – but the experience was positive.

The preparation made me revisit the biblical principles and helped ensure I was up to date with the current law and practice of abortion in the UK.

The students were receptive and eager to learn. Discussing situations from my own practice helped to ground this in real life, not just theory.

I would encourage anyone to participate in an SSM. You will be encouraged by students' enthusiasm and idealism and the opportunity for them to study Christian ethics as part of their curriculum is one that we should all support.

It is not clear how long we will be free to teach Christian medical ethics in our medical schools. Let's take the opportunity while it's available.

Who can help?

Setting up this kind of SSM is a lot of work but there are many others who have experience. Alex Bunn in the CMF student department (alex.bunn@cmf.org.uk) can put you in touch with others who have run similar SSMs, and CMF can send you a resource CD with sample proposals, timetables and talks.

Books such as *Matters of Life and Death*¹ are really helpful as student texts and for preparing talks. The CMF website (www.cmf.org.uk) also has lots of great information on it. Local doctors can bring a wealth of knowledge and experience and CMF staff are often happy to speak on a specific topic if you need them.

references

1. Wyatt J. *Matters of Life and Death*. Leicester: IVP, 1997

and the ethical arguments surrounding PAS.

How has the SSM prepared you for the future?

It has encouraged me to seek God first in all my decisions; as a student now and in the future as a doctor, to put being a Christian first. Debating ethical dilemmas with other Christians helped me formulate my own stance before entering emotive real-life situations. It has further motivated me to become a good doctor, and a good ambassador for Christ to patients and colleagues.

Would you recommend this to others?

The teaching was excellent, thought-provoking and rousing. I would thoroughly recommend this SSM.

Sarah Gwynne is a former CMF staffworker and now a specialist registrar in oncology in Wales