Bioethics is a broad subject, but generally consists of the ethical evaluation of issues arising from healthcare and the life sciences. It is inevitable that bioethical issues will continue to arise, so it’s important to know how to reason clearly about them. Bioethical reasoning is used to focus discussion, suggest new avenues for progress in healthcare, bioscience, law, and policy, and to expose flawed thinking.

Science and healthcare are hugely powerful tools. But with great power comes great responsibility. If you enjoy thinking about what science and healthcare can do, and also what they ought to do, then bioethics is for you.

“Bioethics helps grapple with new and emerging technologies. Its relevance reaches much further than just its own subject, but can be used to view, understand, and explain new ideas and concepts across a variety of different disciplines.”

Greg Lewis
MBHli Graduate
Why study Bioethics?
It is almost inevitable that bioethical issues will affect our lives. Sometimes we may be unaware that they do.

When deciding to have a child, should the potential parent(s) be able to choose which child they would like to bring into the world? Should they be required to choose the child that is likely to have the best life?

Research on animals is likely to have occurred to develop medical treatments and test their safety. Is it reasonable to use animals in this way? Is it wrong to use animals to test the safety of recreational drugs?

Many things we can choose to do are open to ethical evaluation. Bioethics is the examination of these choices to determine what follows from them, and what the right choice might be.

The ability to identify ethical issues and use reason to evaluate, discuss, and argue about them is a valuable skill. In personal and professional life this skill helps with thinking through choices and conduct. It is also useful for those seeking a future in healthcare and the life sciences to assist with playing an active and responsible role in increasing the benefits they can deliver.

Background required
Undergraduate bioethics papers do not require specific prior learning and papers can be included to enrich any degree at 200- and 300-level. Undergraduate bioethics papers are not prerequisites for postgraduate study in bioethics. However, undergraduate papers are helpful for postgraduate study.

Career opportunities
Bioethics students come from a range of backgrounds, including law, philosophy, medicine, the life or health sciences, religious studies, social sciences, and psychology. Given this breadth of experience, the transferability of many skills gained in bioethics is advantageous. It means that students may apply their skills to their original field of study and enrich it further or take it in new directions.

There are many jobs and careers to which bioethics graduates are particularly suited. These include academic research in bioethics, teaching at all levels, and bioethics-related work in science, healthcare, and law. Bioethics graduates also work in areas such as health governance, healthcare, science and environmental policy development, health advocacy, regulation, and review of research, health, and environmental law.

The growing awareness that good practice in medicine and bioscience is informed by an understanding of its ethical implications means that studying bioethics adds significant value to any qualification. Bioethics graduates may use their knowledge of bioethics as a way to distinguish themselves among graduates in the sciences, medicine, and other disciplines.

Bioethics at Otago
Bioethics is available at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Students can take papers at 200- or 300-level to enhance their degree, or undertake postgraduate study.

Health Sciences professional students are taught medical ethics by staff at the Bioethics Centre, and further courses are available for these students.

The Bioethics Centre hosts a biennial bioethics conference, weekly seminars during the semester featuring local, national, and international speakers, and a student forum for postgraduate students.

Teaching style
The Centre promotes a supportive and rigorous learning environment.

Papers at undergraduate level are taught via lectures and tutorials, using an interactive approach where engagement and debate is welcome. Web-based learning resources are also utilised for local and distance students. Further independent study is required.

Postgraduate opportunities
There are many postgraduate degrees and diplomas offered, including a Certificate of Proficiency, Graduate and Postgraduate Diplomas, the Master of Health Sciences (endorsed in Bioethics), the Master of Bioethics and Health Law (MBHL), and the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Bioethics. Most masters’ students complete a dissertation or thesis, and coursework. Postgraduate students come from a range of backgrounds and include health care professionals, law graduates, and those with policy roles.

At postgraduate level, teaching is delivered using web-based video conferencing. All papers are internally assessed.

Bioethics research at Otago
The wide range of research at the Bioethics Centre aims to examine the conventional and novel moral dilemmas arising from medical research, clinical settings, and advances brought about by life sciences and biotechnologies.

Members of staff undertake research in a wide range of fields including:

- Animal ethics
- Clinical bioethics
- Cross-cultural bioethics
- Environmental ethics
- Genetics and ethics
- Neuroethics
- Paediatric ethics
- Psychiatric / mental health ethics
- Reproductive ethics
- Sports medicine ethics

Commonly this research is multidisciplinary, so our staff frequently collaborate with those from other academic areas.

PROFILE
Greg Lewis

After completing both law and science degrees, Bioethics was a natural progression for Greg Lewis. “Bioethics seemed the natural answer; I could apply my legal reasoning along with my understanding of scientific concepts,” he explains.

Greg has graduated with a Master of Bioethics and Health Law (MBHL), and found not only the study stimulating, but that his qualification has opened career pathways.

The contemporary nature of the study along with its interdisciplinary focus are major aspects of the appeal of bioethics.

“Bioethics helps grapple with new and emerging technologies.

“Its relevance reaches much further than just its own subject, but can be used to view, understand and explain new ideas and concepts across a variety of different disciplines,” says Greg.

Following the completion of the MBHL, Greg worked for nearly three years in the Ministry of Health’s legal team. As a member of that team, Greg was responsible for issues such as xenotransplantation, the development of legislation on assisted reproduction treatments, and germ cell line genetic modification. He was also involved with providing legal advice on the regulatory issues surrounding SARS.

Currently he is employed as a Foreign Policy Analyst at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade where he uses the research, analytical, and writing skills developed during his MBHL study. “I learnt how to approach new and often complicated situations using a framework of jurisprudence and ethics. These skills have provided a skill set that can be used in a much wider policy setting outside of healthcare,” adds Greg.

That wider setting is a reality for Greg as he advances in his diplomatic career in New Zealand’s major foreign embassies.

For questions about Bioethics
otago.ac.nz/bioethics

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