

ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT



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Embrace the richness and complexity

When parents want to shield a child from their own terminal cancer diagnosis, what should the care team do? When there are ethical disagreements between patients and their care teams, what's the best next step? Navigating these situations in health care requires profoundly deep and difficult conversations – a responsibility clinical ethicist Gavin Enck, Ph.D., feels grateful to take on.

“What I find most fulfilling is that we are there to help people (patients, families and providers) when the situations are the most difficult. In the worst of times, a clinical ethicist will be there to help,” says Enck. “Moreover, I am always amazed and grateful that in the most difficult situations, there are so many other services, and people are helping as well.”

Enck's desire to pursue a career in clinical ethics came during a volunteer experience with the University of Tennessee Medical Center Clinical Ethics Committee. After earning his Doctorate in Philosophy from the University of Tennessee, he joined MD Anderson's integrated clinical ethics fellowship program in 2013.

“During my fellowship at MD Anderson, I glued myself to the supportive care team. From them, I learned the techniques and value of empathetic communication,” says Enck. “The structure of how we communicate is as vital as what we say to patients and families. The two-way exchange of ideas and information and being clear and kind is the best communication – whether providers, patients, or families. This lesson has stayed with me and influenced my clinical and academic work.”

Upon completing his fellowship, Enck held numerous positions in clinical ethics, including system director of clinical ethics at INTEGRIS Health and clinical ethicist at OhioHealth, before he received the call in 2023 from his fellowship mentor, Nico Nortje, Ph.D., executive director, Center for Clinical Ethics, about an assistant professor position open at MD Anderson.

“I jumped at the opportunity to return to MD Anderson because there is no place like it on Earth. At MD Anderson, every employee's goal is to improve the lives of patients and families experiencing cancer,” says Enck. “The entire focus of the organization is on patient

care. Moreover, as the No. 1 cancer hospital in the world, the expectation – not the ideal or aim but expectation – is you will be and do your best. In other words, the floor, not the ceiling, is set to doing the best for patients and families.”

Enck says that participating in MD Anderson’s integrated clinical ethics fellowship program set the course for much of the work in his career, including the opportunity to return to MD Anderson.

In his current role as assistant professor and newly named clinical ethics fellowship program director, Enck continues to focus on moral philosophy, epistemology and neuroethics. Since coming to MD Anderson in January 2024, he has worked to revise and relaunch Epic’s clinical ethics consultation documentation and update the clinical ethics fellowship program to focus on gaining experience in the clinical setting.

“Using our improved documentation, I-PASS, structured training in empathic communication and empowering fellows to develop innovative projects, the hope is for these – and future – fellows to set the standard for all clinical ethicists working in cancer care,” says Enck.

Enck also shares the following four pieces of advice with current fellows:

1. “Never worry about the other lunch tables. Focus on what you are doing and what you can control.”
2. “Don’t take things personally. You are not the protagonist in everyone else’s story.”
3. “Life is about luck. You cannot change luck, but you can always position yourself for the opportunity to be lucky.”
4. “Embrace the richness and complexity in things. Put otherwise, in the words of HL Mencken, ‘There is always a well-known solution to every human problem – neat, plausible, and wrong.’”

“To be clear, I am terrible, but it is relaxing,” adds Enck.

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