

BOOK REVIEW

Do Less Harm. Ethical Questions for Health Historians

Edited by Courtney E. Thompson and Kylie M. Smith

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This is a collection of essays written from personal experience about various aspects of the ethics of historical medical research. The editors relate how it arose out of an online meeting of the American Association for the History of Medicine in 2020, where an online chat about the topic started and evolved into a working group and the current book. As several relate in their essays, modern ethical research committees are remarkably uninterested in the ethics of research of the past and so this is an attempt to develop a greater awareness.

The essays are arranged around five themes: being a historian, managing collections, research, writing and teaching. The 28 essays are all about 10 pages long and their style, with relatively little jargon, makes this a very readable book that can be dipped into or read fully. There is no debate on more rarefied aspects such as the validity or durability of the standards we currently advocate in America and Europe and whether they have a multicultural and global validity. There is little on whether the current ethics of clinicians and history academics differ. Several write about aspects of how one deals with past material where the standards of collecting or imaging do not meet the current criteria for making such collections or images but do not discuss the implications for maintaining future collections. Some experiences seem slightly naïve, for example the expert witness being surprised that the lawyers who found the conclusions adverse for their clients, tried to have his report dismissed as hearsay or opinion. As he found out, the historian's rules of evidence are not those of a lawyer.

The approach of this book is to stimulate personal and local debate amongst health historians. In this it succeeds well. None of the essays claim to know all the answers and few didactic declarations are made, but each describes personal experiences and approaches to the issue discussed, though all have been commented on by others within the group. There is an appendix of 'Ethical Questions for Health Historians to Consider' with about 5 questions around each of the five areas, but they are questions and not requirements.

I would recommend this book for any would be historian who wants to think about the ethics of what they are doing or planning to do.

Peter Carpenter
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