HEALTH, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY (HTS)

People

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About HTS

Led by Dr Susan Kelly, the primary focus of the HTS group is to serve as a focus at the University of Exeter for interdisciplinary research involving social aspects of emerging medical technologies particularly of diagnosis and intervention. HTS research explores social aspects of technological innovation in the life sciences, health and medicine. Our members are engaged in research addressing a wide range of health related technologies, with a particular focus on the sociology of diagnosis, the sociology of intervention, and the mainstreaming of genetics/genomics in medicine. Growing out of the ESRC Centre for Genomics in Society (Egenis), we have considerable expertise studying the role of genetics/genomics in diagnosis, health systems, and experiences of patients, consumers, families and health care professionals.

We take diagnosis broadly to be a social process defining the boundary between sickness and wellness, the normal and the pathological. It is a process fundamentally about categorisation of people and biological and life processes, within particular disciplinary and knowledge contexts. Social aspects of diagnosis are of importance in understanding contested conditions, which have unknown causes and poorly defined biological aetiology, such as Chronic Fatigue Syndrome and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. Social aspects of diagnosis are also important in understanding the health and health system implications of novel diagnostic categories, such as ‘pre-diabetes’.
Diagnosis as a social process is sensitive to context, including the contexts of technological innovation. However, diagnosis has profound implications for the social experience, self understanding, health outcomes and behaviour of both individuals and families. It often is a node in a trajectory of experience from symptom experience and recognition, through care seeking and biomedical encounters, through to intervention decisions, experiences and outcomes. Diagnosis as a social process is integrally related to understanding the impacts of new health technologies on health systems, professionals and patients; the role of patient and support groups in forwarding practice change; and to understanding the social and behavioural consequences of disease labelling.

Research undertaken by HTS scholars how emerging diagnostic technologies contribute to shaping social processes of diagnosis, providing new – or reinforcing existing – classifications of disease and illness, identities and experiences, with consequences for understanding the dynamics of diagnostic practices. We focus on how technologies create, reframe and highlight particular diagnoses and what drives the development of new technologies. We explore the following indicative questions:

What are the primary policy domains relevant to the sociology of diagnosis? In what ways do they constrain or facilitate the emergence of different forms of diagnosis?

How do diagnoses become stabilised and what roles do technologies play in these processes?

How do patients respond to diagnoses? For example, do patients respond differently to diagnostic information that is provided via genetic testing than more traditional diagnoses that rely on interpretation of symptoms and signs that are ‘read’ on the body in very different ways?

How do both lay and professional uses of technology change the understanding and assessment of diagnosis, disease and intervention?

**HTS Methodologies**

HTS is a unique research group, employing innovative methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives from the sociology of health and illness, sociology of technology and society, social psychology and bioethics, as well as drawing insights from the discipline of sociology more broadly. Our work is also informed by interaction with colleagues with expertise in the philosophy of science, life sciences and medicine. A newly established group within the institutional contexts of Egenis and the university of Exeter’s Department of
Sociology & Philosophy, we are a focal point for collaboration with colleagues across the university and including international comparative analyses.

**HTS Research**  
Current research projects related to the sociology of diagnosis include novel developments in antenatal medicine that capitalise on rapidly expanding genetic sequencing technologies, such as non-invasive prenatal genetic diagnosis (NIPD), developments that are already having societal impacts as well as raising ethical awareness; direct-to-consumer genetic testing and research participation models; psychiatric genetics; paediatric biomedical diagnostics and intervention; the organisation, ethics and relationships involved in medical approaches to undiagnosable paediatric conditions; and familial responses to diagnostic practices related to disease syndromes of variable expression (e.g., NF1 and autism). While we have a particular focus on genetic medicine and health, and how they are shaped by and shape society, we expand this focus to include the spill over of technological developments into areas of medicine and biomedical knowledge not typically thought of as genetic. As political momentum to mainstream genetic medicine builds, we will follow and analyse implementation pathways, implications across medical disciplines and for families.