

# Patient care at center of ASU Health's incorporation of humanities

**Ethics and bioethics are examples of how humanities are important in health care**

By Scott Bordow, ASU News  
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ASU Health has embarked on its mission to transform health care and create a new kind of health professional.

ASU Health includes four academic units — two of which are new to the university ecosystem. The [John Shufeldt School of Medicine and Medical Engineering](#) and the [School of Technology for Public Health](#) join the [Edson College of Nursing and Health Innovation](#) and the [College of Health Solutions](#) to form the educational foundation for ASU Health.

In addition, the [Health Observatory](#) builds on ASU's existing relationship with Mayo Clinic to develop a better understanding of community health in Arizona, and the [Medical Master's Institute](#) creates opportunities for health professionals and medical students to upskill in areas like pediatrics, gerontology, advanced nursing and nutrition.

In the third installment of a five-part series, ASU talked to [Cora Fox](#), associate dean of health humanities in the John Shufeldt School of Medicine and Medical Engineering and director of humanities integration for ASU Health, about how humanities and medical care will intersect at ASU.

*Note: Answers have been edited for length and/or clarity.*

**Question:** You co-founded the [Health Humanities initiative](#) in 2014. What was the impetus for the initiative?

**Answer:** There was a lot of interest in the health humanities among the faculty as a developing sub-discipline that seemed to offer different perspectives on the challenges to health care. I was asked if I would lead up this initiative to try to bring together the faculty who already existed at ASU

and were already doing this amazing work.

What we're doing now is thinking hard about how the humanities can come into ASU Health and establish an infrastructure for this really interesting disciplinary work, and bring students and faculty around some of these questions that are wicked societal problems involving health in the United States.

**Q: What is health humanities?**

**A:** The health humanities is an interdisciplinary academic sub-discipline, and it started mostly within medical schools. It sort of positioned the humanities as a side in training health professionals and, in particular, physicians.

What has happened is people who work within that field have begun to embrace a much wider sense of how the humanities might be able to do good in a larger context where we include notions of health beyond just the clinical encounter and the institutions of biomedicine. But we instead begin to think about health as something that also takes place in communities and can also be benefited by humanities work. So, the term health humanities attempts to capture the ways in which human beings actually are healthy.

**Q: Can you give me an example of how humanities work in health care outside, say, a doctor's office?**

**A:** One of the fundamental ways that humanities can integrate into community spaces is through storytelling. Story in the present can be a very powerful tool for promoting health in communities. Telling stories about practices of everyday life, telling stories about the history of where we are in our health care landscape and what the challenges and barriers are. All of those stories matter in terms of how we frame health care in the United States. So that's one way that the humanities can intervene.

The other way is to insist and to nuance the ethics of the directions that health care innovation takes. For instance, humanities faculty in philosophy and bioethics on campus at ASU have lots to say to people who are thinking about how AI is going to be employed in something like remote care — any kind of medical technology. And so offering a space where there can be dialogue between the kind of academic fields and the places where these innovations in technology emerge, both within the clinic and also within the community, gives us all kinds of new ways of addressing these challenges and also embracing the potentials for these to make a huge difference in people's lives.

**Q: So, essentially, health humanities address all the different ways good health can be defined?**

**A:** If you go back to the very beginnings of medicine, it has always been conceived as both an art and a science. Humanities exists in that art side. It advances ways of thinking about the human at the center of care.

**Q: Let's shift to ASU Health. How will humanities factor into the curriculum and teaching within ASU Health?**

**A:** We have a group of faculty who are collaborating already and have been working together over many years. There's a lot of interest in trying to create a center that might give us a place to bring some of these conversations to life and give them a permanence and a sustainability that would allow collaborations with our community partners.

We'd also like to offer undergraduate students possibilities for working in this area because there's a lot of student interest. It would be built within ASU Health to serve all the health-profession schools.

One of the other reasons we think this is a great idea is that it would allow us to create collaborations within that group. It would be really interesting for us to create inter-professional programs where we had physicians in the same place as our nurses.

**Q: Specifically, what would you envision this center doing?**

**A:** One (idea) is a patient story project, which is partly a response to the ways in which the landscape is changing so rapidly with technological innovations. All of those things are swirling around what is so essential, the patient and clinician relationship. So, this gives us a chance to re-center on patient stories and offers physicians the opportunity to think of their patients in more humane, larger ways.

We're also reenvisioning how we think about care in more nuanced ways. Responding to, say, what does it mean when we're going to have ambient AI — AI that operates in the background — in the clinical space. It raises all of these really pressing issues that are coming up in all kinds of locations in the health care landscape around empathy.

We're interested in creating a community of practice where we talk through the nuances of what care is — what is it fundamentally, how does it work best?

**Q: Anything else?**

**A:** We want to think about ethics and bioethics in terms of values, virtues and virtuous behavior. It's kind of broadening out our concept of bioethics. This is responding to calls from bioethicists themselves and other people who work in these categories.

We want to widen the scope of thinking about ethics and values to include environmental ethics and disability studies and public health ethics. We want to start thinking about how we can't think about regulatory structures within medicine and create a set of ethics that just address those. We need to begin to think about how complicated, actually, the landscape of health really is.

**Q: It sounds like health humanities is making sure the patient's health outcome and health future is at the forefront of care.**

**A:** That's what we're doing. But I would add one thing to that. We are also making sure that we don't forget the patient is an individual who operates within a community as well. That's why we've kind of widened it out to call it health humanities instead of necessarily just medical. It's the patient and the community at the center of what we are doing within health care.

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March 6 — Jordan Coulston: [The role innovation and entrepreneurship will play in ASU Health](#)

March 13 — Cora Fox: The intersection of humanities and medical care

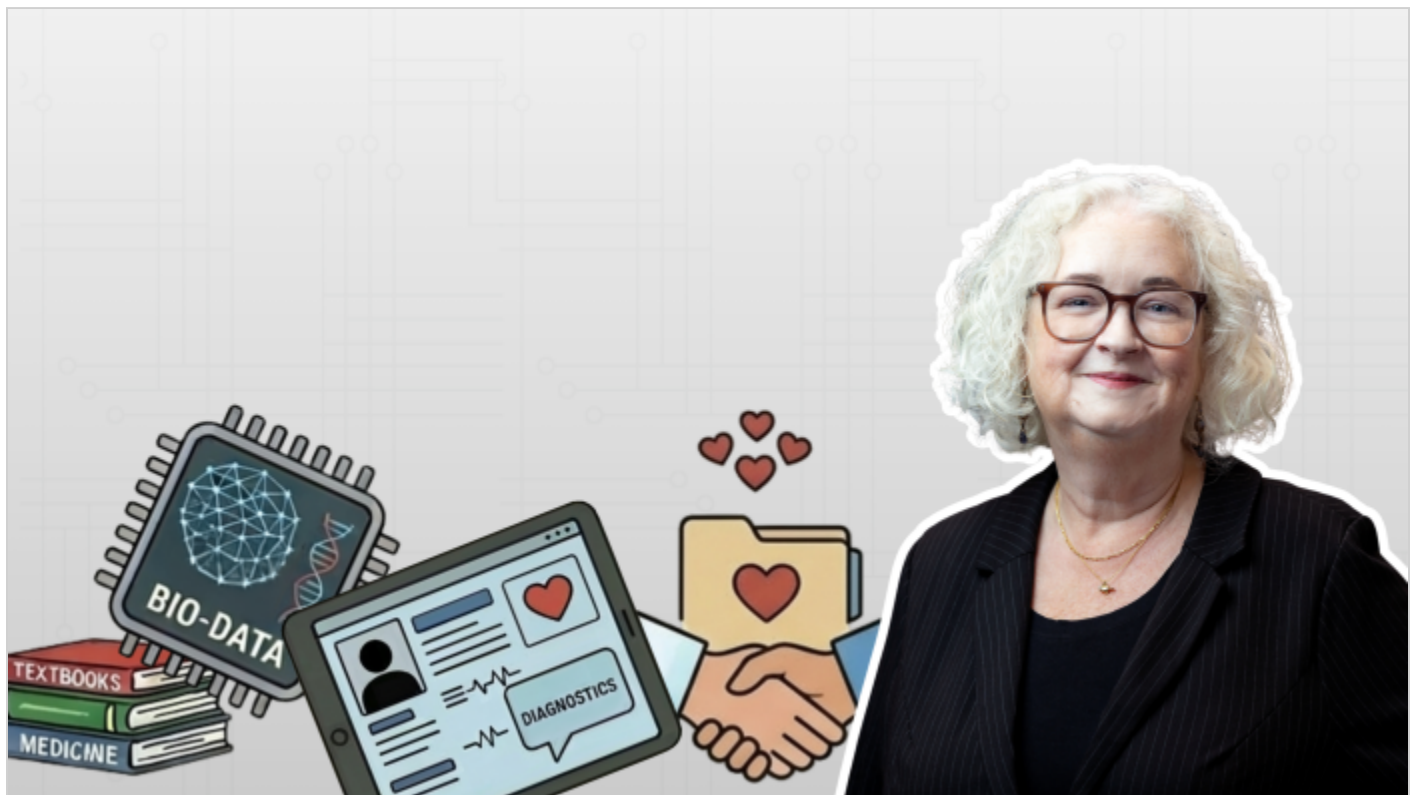
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*This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).*

## Main image



Cora Fox is the associate dean of health humanities in the John Shufeldt School of Medicine and Medical Engineering and an associate professor of English in The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Graphic by Chad Musch/ASU