



A · M · E · R · I · C · A · N  
A N T H R O P O L O G I C A L  
A S S O C I A T I O N

Dr. Henry Sondheimer  
hsondheimer@aamc.org  
Association of American Medical Colleges  
2450 N Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20037

Dear Dr. Sondheimer,

We understand that the MCAT is currently undergoing revision, and are pleased to hear that it is being expanded to include questions from the fields of sociology, psychology, and ethics. However, we are concerned that there are no plans to include questions from the field of medical anthropology, as well as some areas of biological anthropology.

The Society for Medical Anthropology is an international organization of 1,350 professional medical anthropologists, and a section of the American Anthropological Association – its umbrella group with over 11,000 members. Medical anthropology investigates the human experience of illness across cultures and in diverse settings. Medical anthropological research has been essential for our knowledge of health and cultural diversity in the United States and around the world.

The ability of modern societies to understand population health issues and develop effective means of preventing and treating health problems relies on the research of medical anthropologists and other scientists. Research in medical anthropology, often funded by NSF and NIH, benefits health care policy makers and practitioners in the United States and in global institutions, such as the World Health Organization.

Courses in medical anthropology address such issues as:

- Public attitudes and knowledge about health and health care.
- Popular health culture and household health care practices.
- The family as a context of health and health beliefs.

- Cultural aspects of clinical medicine, including cultural competence in professional medical training.
- Complementary and alternative medicine, and its prevalence and efficacy.
- Community-based approaches to prevention and treatment.
- Health care disparities.
- Global use and interpretation of pharmaceuticals and biotechnology.
- The interplay among social, political, and ecological factors associated with infectious diseases and disease vectors.
- Substance use and abuse.
- Determinants and management of chronic diseases such as diabetes and hypertension.
- Factors affecting achievement of U.N. Millennium Development Goals, and the U.S. Global Health Initiative, including the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

Much of medical anthropology involves collaborative research partnerships with scholars from other disciplines, including medicine and public health. Medical anthropologists are an active presence in medical schools and schools of public health. The field is part of the crucial network of research and practice that helps to inform policy, legislation, and health initiatives at regional, national, and international levels.

Medical anthropology offers invaluable training for premed students in these important realms:

1. Anthropology is the pre-eminent discipline that studies cross-cultural variation in systems of belief and practices relevant to health.
2. Clinicians confront increasingly diverse patient populations, and understanding the global diversity of beliefs about health and healing will make them more capable practitioners.
3. A core competency for modern clinicians, "cultural competence," grows out of work done in the field of anthropology, and even elementary coursework in cultural or medical anthropology will serve a crucial role in preparing the next generation of clinicians to think critically about what it means to be culturally competent and how they can best care for individuals whose beliefs about health, healing, and interpersonal relations may differ significantly from their own.
4. The Institute of Medicine has issued a call for nationwide attention to eliminating racial and ethnic health disparities; medical anthropology is central in educating pre-medical students about health and health care access among vulnerable populations.

5. Medical anthropology courses provide students with tools and skills for productive cross-cultural clinical encounters and global health activities.
6. Medical anthropology training also addresses medical ethics in cross-cultural research.
7. Anthropological knowledge can help health professionals meet the urgent clinical and sociomedical challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
8. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention employ dozens of professional medical and biological anthropologists to understand the social dimensions of disease, the social epidemiologic patterns in the U.S. and globally, and prevention health measures.
9. Anthropologists have contributed significantly to our understanding of the AIDS pandemic throughout the world, focusing on HIV prevention, AIDS care, HIV epidemiology, and the social aspects of HIV/AIDS.

Biological anthropology can also enrich the MCAT with questions about forensic anthropology, human genetics, and human biological variation.

We can assist you in developing appropriate questions for the MCAT based upon medical anthropology and biological anthropology coursework. We are prepared to develop a working committee within the Society for Medical Anthropology to achieve this goal. We also understand that you are recommending introductory courses in psychology, sociology, and biology. We would like to suggest that you include Introduction to Anthropology, as well, which would include basic concepts of medical anthropology and biological anthropology. Please contact Dr. Douglas A Feldman at [dfeldman@brockport.edu](mailto:dfeldman@brockport.edu) or (585) 395-5709 to discuss this. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Leith Mullings, Ph.D.  
President, American Anthropological Association

Douglas A. Feldman, Ph.D.  
President, Society for Medical Anthropology