

FALL 2015 COLLOQUIA SERIES

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Pig-Human Relations in Neonatology: Knowing and Unknowing in Resource Making and Resource Management

This paper explores how boundaries and relationships between human and animal are practiced in the field of translational neonatology in which animals are seen as central resources for bringing together the bench and the bedside within the same scientific framework. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in a Danish pig laboratory and in a Danish neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) I investigate the spatial and conceptual processes through which the pig is made into a resource for human infant life and through which questions of resource prioritization enter life-and-death decision-making in the NICU. The ethnography illuminates how aspects of the work of imagining, claiming, making and administering resources are open to experience yet actively unknown or silenced in specific contexts. In the spaces of translational neonatology the “unknown known” concerns the possible existential equality between piglet and human researcher; in decision-making in the NICU the “unknown known” concerns the selection of the worthy and the less worthy lives, what we may think of as the inescapable existential inequality between infants. While it may be that paradigmatic scientific shifts have come to question human uniqueness and a fixed boundary between human and animal, daily practices in the field of translational neonatology muddle this picture. The study demonstrates that that within a translational framework in which the pig has moved closer to the human, asymmetries and disconnections between species and spaces are essential when bringing the pig into the clinic and managing resources in the NICU.

Mette N. Svendsen is associate professor and head of the Center for Medical Science and Technology Studies at the University of Copenhagen. She is the author of articles on genetic testing, donations of embryos to human embryonic stem cell research, the use of human subjects in pharmacogenomics research, and the use of the pig and the monkey in experimental research. She is currently heading the research project “A life worth living: negotiating worthiness in human and animal” funded by the Danish Research Council. The project explores the many ways in which biomedical knowledge production and its translation to the clinic are embroiled in existential questions of life’s worth. It takes a particular interest in how relationships, boundaries, and exchanges between human and animal are practiced in the development of medical knowledge and technology and how life is understood and administered in the interface between laboratory and clinic.