

**Tentative Title of Dissertation:**

Rhetorical Indeterminacy: The Mobilization of Uncertainty in Health and Medicine

**Abstract:**

My project examines how uncertainty is rhetorically mobilized in health and medicine. The goal of this examination is to pinpoint how uncertainty is manufactured, leveraged, or otherwise rhetorically deployed in these contexts. Medical decisions frequently require an acceptance or rejection of uncertain outcomes, making uncertainty a crucial component of how we understand, assess, and conceptualize health and medicine. Furthermore, by examining these particular sites, we stand to gain a more sophisticated general understanding of uncertainty itself, a foundational epistemological concept that complicates our ability to make decisions, assess values, or produce new ideas.

Using a mixed set of methodologies, I examine four sites where uncertainty is a critical component. Chapter One explores my father's attempts to receive disability for his exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War, where uncertainty is used to impede these efforts. Chapter Two examines the controversy over the effectiveness of antidepressants, where the relative effect of uncertainty is itself indeterminate. Chapter Three traces the debate over placebo effects, where uncertainty provides rhetorical cover for questionable practices. Chapter Four examines the rise of the biopsychosocial model in addiction studies, where uncertainty functions as parsimony. Finally, Chapter Five synthesizes the previous four chapters, connects my research to broader concerns in rhetoric, and argues for the centrality of uncertainty as a rhetorical resource. Together, these cases demonstrate the complex ways in which uncertainty is rhetorically mobilized in health and medicine.