

THE UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO'S
Institute for Life Course and Aging is pleased to present

FRAILTY AS A BIOPOWER: THE CASE OF RATIONING CARE FOR OLDER PEOPLE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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**Tuesday, June 13th, 2023
12:00 pm – 1:00 pm**

[ZOOM LINK](#)

In this paper I explore how biomedical iterations of the concept of frailty both operationalised and justified the rationing of medical care for older people in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 was expected to overwhelm the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK. In March 2020, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) published the 'COVID-19 rapid guideline: critical care in adults', which advised that clinicians use the Clinical Frailty Score (CFS) to inform decisions about which patients over the age of 65 should be offered intensive care and ventilatory support.

I draw on a Foucauldian Critical Discourse Analysis of the NICE guideline and supporting online resources. In doing so I reveal how the guidance merchandises the CFS as a way of stratifying older people, which permits the allocation of resources along these lines. I explore how this is justified, through epidemiological discourses of risk, which are merged with the language of individual mortality prediction. I show that the pandemic has increased the uptake of the concept of frailty by healthcare professionals. The result of this is the effective obfuscation of the concept's limitations and ambiguities; the ageism implicit in the response to COVID-19 in the UK; and the relative resource scarcity facing the UK's NHS.

Dr Louise Tomkow is a NIHR Academic Clinical Lecturer in complex health needs, spending 50% of her time working at Salford Royal Hospital as a medical doctor, specialising in the care of older people, and 50% of her time undertaking research at the University of Manchester. Louise's research interests include health inequalities and underserved populations, healthcare access, frailty and end of life care.

Louise's PhD examined how forced migration impacts health in later life. Current research projects include the NIHR-funded projects ['Improving discussions about resuscitation for bereaved relatives in COVID-19'](#); ['Palliative and End of life Care experiences of people of African and Caribbean descent during COVID-19 \(PEACE\)'](#); and work exploring the healthcare of asylum seekers in multiple occupancy accommodation during Covid-19. Beyond work, Louise is a keen cyclist, a reluctant runner, an obsessive knitter and is currently working on walking all the Wainwright fells in Cumbria, UK.

