

# Minnesota Law

SPRING 2019

THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA LAW SCHOOL MAGAZINE

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LAURA COATES '05  
CNN LEGAL ANALYST



# At the Intersection of Law and Medicine

Professor Susan Wolf's Cutting-Edge Work Connects the Dots Between Disciplines

**SUSAN WOLF HAS LONG BEEN FASCINATED** by medicine and the biological sciences. She pored over the history of surgery and medical biographies in elementary school and studied behavioral evolution in college. Yet after graduating from Princeton University, Wolf found herself in a quandary about whether to pursue medicine or law.

"I was interested in bioethics long before it was a recognized subject," she says. "And truth be told, I was better at talking than at lab work. I loved argumentation."

Today, Wolf holds professorships in law and medicine. She also chairs the groundbreaking Consortium on Law and Values in Health, Environment & the Life Sciences, which links 19 member centers at the University to conduct research and advance dialogue on pressing issues at the intersection of science and society.

## Propelled on a Path

Wolf's path after college led her to work at Southbury Training School, a state-run facility in Connecticut for people with disabilities. That experience propelled her to think deeply about the ethics of care and patients' rights. A few years later, at Yale Law School, she met Jay Katz,

a leading theorist of the physician-patient relationship. "I began to see how I could marry my love for biomedicine with law and ethics," she says.

After clerking for a federal judge in New York City, Wolf became a litigator at a large law firm, where she collaborated with a partner who chaired the presidential commission on bioethics during the Carter administration. She then plunged full-time into bioethics at The Hastings Center, an interdisciplinary institute addressing ethical issues in health care, science, and technology. "I was fortunate to spend eight years at the epicenter of bioethics," she says.

## At the Intersection of Science and Law

In 1993, the University of Minnesota recruited Wolf to forge a crucial connection between law, biomedicine, and ethics at a time when concerns about end-of-life care, health care reform, and genetics were exploding. She joined the faculty, based in the Law School but with half of her time allocated to the Center for Bioethics in the Academic Health Center.

Wolf quickly began to build programs—first, the University's Joint Degree Program in Law,

Health & the Life Sciences, and then the University-wide Consortium on Law and Values in Health, Environment & the Life Sciences.

"The Consortium deals with issues at the intersection of law, ethics, policy, and the biomedical and life sciences, such as how to oversee emerging technologies," says Wolf. "These are 'perfect storm' problems that obey no disciplinary borders and require interdisciplinary collaboration."

The Consortium's pioneering work has attracted funding from the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and others. A recent series of NIH-funded





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projects analyzed whether to offer research participants individual-specific genomic findings of potential importance to their health. “We asked questions that were brand-new,” says Wolf. “What should researchers do when they find something unexpected, beyond what they are studying? Our work built a foundation for what is now a burgeoning field of research and innovation.”

With support from the University of Minnesota provost’s Grand Challenges program, the Consortium now is partnering across the University and state to investigate how pharmacogenomics—the study of genetic factors affecting patient

reactions to medications—can advance health throughout Minnesota.

On the national level, Wolf is an elected member of the National Academy of Medicine, where she serves on a committee that addresses issues in public policy. She also sits on the advisory panel for an NIH program on genomic analysis in large population studies.

“The challenges posed now by biomedicine and the life sciences are huge,” says Wolf. “These are the problems our collaborative teams are trying to solve.”

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By Kathy Graves, a writer based in Minneapolis.

**Professor Susan M. Wolf** is the McKnight Presidential Professor of Law, Medicine & Public Policy; Faegre Baker Daniels Professor of Law; and Professor of Medicine. She also serves as chair of the Consortium on Law and Values in Health, Environment & the Life Sciences.