

# Bringing Research to LIFE

## In brief

### New VPRO Unit

The Vice-President Research Office has a new unit – the Office of Research Ethics and Compliance (OREC). While the unit is new, most of the staff are familiar.

The new unit represents the merging of Human Ethics, Animal Care and Ethics, Research Quality Management, Biological Safety, and Controlled Goods. The merger of these units into one better reflects the changing landscape for research standards in regulatory and compliance areas.

The biological safety and controlled goods components will only include the portion that relates to research. Both of these units will still be maintained within the Environmental Health and Safety office.

### Important Reminder

#### Course in Human Research Participant Protection (CHRPP) / Course of Research Ethics (CORE)

The Course in Human Research Participant Protection (CHRPP) will soon be replaced by the Course of Research Ethics (CORE) to reflect the new content in the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans 2010 (TCPS 2).

For all researchers submitting an ethics protocol, the REB deadline to complete the CHRPP or CORE tutorial remains September 1, 2011.

Those who have already completed the CHRPP tutorial will NOT be asked to complete the CORE tutorial. If you would like to complete the tutorial, please visit the website at:

<http://www.chrpp.ca/homepage/MAN/>

For further information, please feel free to contact the Research Quality Management Office:

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## Wisdom of the Ages

BY JOHN RYMON



Photo by John Rymon

Faculty of Arts researcher Roisin Cossar is hoping that making a connection with the past will give us a better understanding of the present.

Have you ever thought about how people lived long ago? Roisin Cossar definitely has. An associate professor in the department of history, Cossar is especially interested in the way in which people treated aging and the elderly in the Middle Ages. How old was 'old' in the Middle Ages? Were people more revered as they got older? Did they retire from work, and how did they approach the end of life?

"Studying aging in the past raises questions for how we regard aging today. Making such a connection with the past also allows us to consider how current ideas about aging will change in the future," says Cossar. "It challenges historians to examine age as a social construct, much like gender, race or class."

For much of her career, Cossar has been studying ancient documents from archives in the Italian city of Bergamo, the focus of her dissertation and first book, *The Transformation of the Laity in Bergamo, 1265-c.1400*. Most historians estimate that less than ten per cent of documents dating from the Middle Ages have survived, but the archives in Bergamo have proven to hold an abundance of these texts.

She has studied court records, receipts, contracts and various other documents created in the 14th century by notaries and clerics, educated and somewhat wealthier men of the church. Cossar has used these records as a source of information about the clerics themselves, often following the

trajectory of their lives over several decades.

She has been able to ascertain information on the length of their careers, how long these men lived, and how their rank and stature may have changed as they became older.

Popular belief dictates that people lived to about age 40 during the Middle Ages, although this was only an average life expectancy because of the high infant mortality rate. The very old were rare, but the subjects of Cossar's studies who survived to age 20 (which is when their notarial work began) often lived into their 50s and beyond.

Doctors and medicine have always existed throughout history, although Cossar believes hospitals for the elderly in the Middle Ages were likely more akin to hospices, and medical care closer to spiritual care. Medicine experienced a shift in the 15th century with less reliance on ancient texts. The period saw increased interest in caring for the elderly and the beginning of geriatrics.

The older men Cossar has studied were not seen as isolated or weak, but rather as figures of authority both in their work and family lives. She has even been able to piece together information on the families these men created. Cossar also plans to expand on this area over the spring in Venice, which is an unexpected detour in her career path.

When a return trip to North America was delayed last year by the volcanic

eruptions of Eyjafjallajökull in Iceland, she began a ten day visit to the archives in Venice. "I had no original intentions to work in Venice, but I came across a lot of material on the families of these clerics and priests," she says.

Similar to today, men of the Roman Catholic Church were expected to live chaste lives. However, they would often form households consisting of concubines (housekeepers who became romantic partners), children, other relatives, servants and even slaves. These relationships sometimes did not begin until a cleric reached his 30s or 40s. Apart from religious reasons, family ties were seen as a risk that some of the church's wealth would become accessible to outside family members.

Cossar published a recent article in the *Journal of Women's History* on the women who lived with these men. However, what does the religious condemnation of these relationships tell us about the 14th century church's attempt to reform the clergy? Cossar will be studying the answers in the months to come.

During an upcoming fellowship at Harvard next year, she plans to work from the picturesque Villa I Tatti, part of the Harvard Centre for Italian Renaissance Studies. Each year, the institute invites 15 people studying various aspects of the Renaissance to share their work and exchange ideas.

Cossar is optimistic. "This will push my research much further and I'll be able to get another book out more quickly," she says.

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