Title: What is mental pain and is it a pain? Results from a metasynthesis of qualitative studies and a systematic review of philosophical work

Abstract (200 words):

Mental pain—pain not primarily localized in the body—is a notion used in everyday language and recognized in psychiatry as a major risk factor for suicide and one of the most burdensome aspects of depression. Yet, it remains insufficiently defined. In this presentation, a psychiatrist and a philosopher, members of a multidisciplinary project, address the issue of defining mental pain.

The psychiatrist presents the results of a metasynthesis of forty-nine qualitative studies identifying five core phenomenal features: mental pain is unpleasant, immediate, identity-disrupting, invisible, and often described as worse than physical pain.

The philosopher draws on their systematic review of philosophical work examining whether mental pain qualifies as “pain” to explain why the metasynthesis results are philosophically insufficient to establish that “mental pain” is pain. Focusing on the core feature of “unpleasantness”, they outline the main objection from analytic philosophy: similarities between so-called mental pains and physical pains can be explained by shared unpleasantness. They then argue that the unpleasantness of mental pain includes a specific quality—painfulness—absent from other unpleasant states (e.g. mild emotions or nausea), justifying its classification as pain.

Finally, both discuss how an interdisciplinary meta-research framework promotes mutual illumination between philosophy and the clinical sciences