

Episode: *Author Interview: “Lessons for Ethics From the Kingdom of Fungi”*

Guest: Christy A. Rentmeester, PhD

Host: Tim Hoff

Transcript: Cheryl Green

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[bright theme music]

[00:00:04] TIM HOFF: Welcome to another episode of the Author Interview series from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*. I’m your host, Tim Hoff. This series provides an alternative way to access the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Dr Christy Rentmeester, the managing editor of the *AMA Journal of Ethics*. She’s here to discuss her article, “*Lessons for Ethics From the Kingdom of Fungi*,” in the February 2024 issue of the Journal, [Health Ecology and Disease Transmission](#). Dr Rentmeester, thank you so much for being on the podcast. [music fades]

DR CHRISTY RENTMEESTER: Thanks, Tim.

[00:00:39] HOFF: So, what is the main ethics point of your article?

RENTMEESTER: I lay out the main features of what I call an American anthropocentric view of dignity. So, it’s American because it’s centered on individuals, and it’s anthropocentric because it’s centered on human beings. And from an ethics perspective, we miss two key things that are central to our cultivating a humbler view of humans’ roles in our lives with plants and non-human animals and fungi and landscapes themselves. So, a first key thing is that human health never...it has never stood alone, and it never will stand alone. So, a second key thing is that most, if not all, beings in our ecologies should be regarded as having their own dignity, dignity that is worthy of respect on its own terms.

[00:01:44] HOFF: And so, what do you see as the most important thing for health professions students and trainees specifically to take from this article?

RENTMEESTER: Well, in spite of its obvious advantages to humans, anthropocentrism has become really its own threat to humans’ continued existence, and health professions students are generally not formally taught content that robustly problematizes human-centered ways of thinking about health. As caring for each other becomes more about macro-level needs—so clean water, clean air, shelter, nutritionally dense food—we should probably reprioritize how much we invest in micro-level, personalized approaches to health care that we know inequitably benefit so few of us. Of course, we’re always going to need people to care well for other people, and we’re always going to need people to care for the material conditions of living. But it’s likely that we’ll do well to broaden, and not narrow, our practices of conferring dignity and other kinds of moral status on a wider range of beings.

So, I argue, for example, that even the staunchest anthropocentrist has good reasons to care about species, for example, that are not yet known to science. So, I suggest in this article that we should be a lot smarter about how we express humility and respect for what we don’t know, because what we don’t know can hurt us. Students and trainees might consider why it’s a job of nursing, a job of medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, and all the health professions to try to think more powerfully about beings and species we have in the global ecology that we don’t even

know that we're losing on a daily basis. An upshot for students to consider is that we owe duties of care to beings that we don't yet know or know much about.

[00:03:59] HOFF: And finally, if you could add a point to this article that you didn't have the time or the space to fully explore, what would that be?

RENTMEESTER: Well, I might've added a quotation from fellow Wisconsinite Aldo Leopold. Leopold was a keen observer of the ecological phenomena in which his and his family members' lives were enmeshed, and he wrote several books on a central theme that he called "the land ethic." And I've heard some people call Aldo Leopold the original bioethicist. Maybe that's true. This last theme issue, this February theme issue, is about the merits and drawbacks of One Health as a way of thinking about human health, non-human animal health, and environmental health, and Leopold foresaw our deep need for this set of perspectives. He wasn't perfect, of course, but he generally modeled a kind of respect for our sources of energy, especially food and heat. And I call out energy in particular here because energy should be seen as a reason to think more deeply about what unity of health conceptions require of us.

So, precisely every living being that can't do photosynthesis has to eat something that does. Humans cannot do the miracle of photosynthesis. Humans cannot make food out of light, and we absolutely cannot live without things that do. So, the Leopold quotation that would be worthwhile here, I think, is from *A Sand County Almanac* and concerns what he calls quote-unquote "dangers of not understanding how grounded humans should be in their food and heat chains." So, he remarks that being out of touch with land as a source of life poses two dangers. "One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace." So, One Health has much to teach us, but we probably won't learn much from it if we don't avidly cultivate humility about what we know about humanity's roles in global ecologies and energy supply chains. [theme music returns]

[00:06:39] HOFF: Dr Rentmeester, thank you so much for your time on the podcast and for your contribution to the Journal this month.

RENTMEESTER: Thanks, Tim.

HOFF: To read the full article, as well as the rest of this month's issue for free, visit our site, journalofethics.org. We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.