

Episode: *Author Interview: "Should Children Be Enrolled in Clinical Research in Conflict Zones?"*

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Transcript by: Cheryl Green

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[bright theme music]

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 format for accessing the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Dr Dónal O'Mathúna, an Associate Professor in the College of Nursing and the Center for Bioethics and Medical Humanities at the Ohio State University in Columbus. He's here to discuss his article coauthored with Dr Nawaraj Upadhaya *Should Children Be Enrolled In Clinical Research In Conflict Zones?*, in the June 2022 issue of *The Journal*, [Health Care In Conflict Zones](#). Dr O'Mathúna, thank you so much for being on the podcast with me.

DR DONAL O'MATHÚNA: Oh, thank you, Tim. It's great to be here. [music fades out]

HOFF: To begin with, what's the main ethics point that you and your coauthor are making in this article?

O'MATHÚNA: Well, I think it is that first of all, carrying out research in difficult situations, in this case of conflict zones, is something that is important, and that includes research with children. But it opens up a host of complexities, some of them practical, but also some of them ethical. And so, these are very significant challenges. They require a lot of careful consideration, a lot of dialogue and planning ahead of time, but that ultimately, there often are ways to address these ethical issues in satisfactory ways. But they, like I said, they do require quite a bit of planning, and in some cases, may lead to a conclusion that this particular research shouldn't be carried out at this particular point. But that in many cases, with everybody's agreement, the importance of providing evidence for health care provision in conflict settings does warrant ways to carry out this type of research.

HOFF: And what do you see as the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to take from this article?

O'MATHÚNA: Well, I think the most important element here is that the planning that's needed here is very important and that a knowledge of the setting where this type of research is going to happen is really crucial. And for that reason, thankfully at the moment, a lot of students and faculty and clinicians from the US and other well-resourced countries, for the most part, we are not going to be familiar with dealing with research in conflict zones in our own home settings. And so, the establishing of relationships with people who are more used to those settings is really crucial. And so, not trying to devise this type of research sort of like at home, so to speak, and then think about going somewhere and trying to start from having a pre-planned project in place is really crucial. So that the dialogue needs to begin much earlier with those that are working in these settings have a really good understanding of the cultural practices, the beliefs, the ethical values in those settings should then be actively involved in all of the steps that are going to be involved in

the project, from coming up with the focus of it in the first place, making sure that it is a piece of research that's actually addressing very important needs in that setting, and then looking at how people familiar with those cultures in those settings are able to give input into the methods that would be used, the ways of collecting data and analyzing data, and of course, being involved in working with the potential participants and their families and ensuring that people are completely informed about what this research involves, what's going to happen during it, and then how the results will hopefully be able to make a difference in their lives when the project is completed and the results disseminated. So, I think it's really around that more complete form of communication between all of the groups who are going to be carrying out different components of these projects is key to getting the ethical aspects into good shape.

HOFF: And finally, if you could add one point that you didn't have the time or space to fully explore, what would that be?

O'MATHÚNA: Well, I think it probably addresses a larger concern that I have and that Nawaraj and I have been working on, this general issue that unfortunately, research ethics has become a field where people think much more about the regulatory aspects and the importance of getting approval from an IRB or an ethics committee and getting maybe Ministry of Health clearance in other countries, getting informed consent documents agreed to and the information disseminated, that those are very important regulatory dimensions of the ethics of doing research in any setting. But unfortunately, the emphasis has sometimes become so much on those dimensions that less attention is paid to the actual everyday ethical issues of planning, conducting, and then disseminating the research.

And so, we would like to have elaborated further on the broader dimensions of ethics that when a study may get actually ethics approval, but that there will often be things that will come up during the day in the field which are going to require reflection on the ethical issues where a particular participant has a certain concern that wasn't anticipated, or something happens that wasn't anticipated. And so that people doing research in conflict settings where it becomes even more difficult to kind of stop what you're doing, get in touch with somebody who is going to be able to give you some advice on an item that comes up during the project is much more difficult. And so that I think we need to support researchers to prepare them better for being able to address those unexpected ethical issues that are likely to happen when your research is underway, and even more so, likely to happen when you're in such a difficult setting as a conflict setting or a disaster setting, a humanitarian crisis setting. [theme music returns]

HOFF: Dr O'Mathúna, thank you so much for being on the podcast today and for you and your coauthor's contribution to the Journal this month.

O'MATHÚNA: Okay, thanks very much, Tim.

HOFF: To read the full article, as well as the rest of the June 2022 issue for free, visit our site, [JournalofEthics.org](https://www.journalofethics.org). We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.