

Episode: *Author Interview: "Isolation"*

Guest: Zachary G. Jacobs, MD

Host: Tim Hoff

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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 Zachary Jacobs, a hospitalist at the Oregon Health & Science University in Portland. He's here to discuss his comic, "*Isolation, Connection, and Learning to Slow Down*" in the November 2023 issue of the Journal, [Health and Loneliness](#). Dr Jacobs, thank you so much for being on the podcast.

DR ZACHARY JACOBS: Thanks so much for having me. I'm excited to be here. [music fades]

[00:00:42] HOFF: So, to begin with, what is the key ethics point of your comic?

JACOBS: I think there are really two key ethical issues that I hoped to highlight with this comic. The first is with regards to the isolation that occurs during hospitalization due to infection control precautions, particularly during the height of a global pandemic like COVID-19. Even under the best of circumstances, hospitalization is an incredibly isolating experience away from home, struggling with a new illness or disease. This may be the most alone a patient has ever felt in their entire life. Now, add on top of that confinement to a small room staff who are wearing layers upon layers of personal protective gear that really limits their ability to meaningfully connect with the patients, as well as visitation by friends and family being severely restricted or even outright disallowed in many cases throughout the pandemic. The isolation that patients begin to experience is palpable, and this is a really complex issue balancing public health with mental well-being. And I'm not saying there is a clear answer here, but at the very least, we as health care workers need to recognize it and to support these patients as best we can.

And that, I think, leads into the second ethical issue of my comic, which is the balance between our duty to our patients and our duty to ourselves and our families. Again, this is not a new issue, but one that was emphasized and underscored by COVID-19. [00:02:36] When the pandemic first started and there was all of this fear and uncertainty, now, all of a sudden, I'm not only spending my precious time away from my loved ones, but also putting myself and my family in potential danger as well. We're all guided by beneficence, the desire to do the right thing and to be present for our patients and their needs, but ethically, we also have the right to care for ourselves and our families. So, there has to be a balance there.

[00:03:11] HOFF: And so, what's the most important thing for health professions students and trainees specifically to take from this work?

JACOBS: One thing I hope everyone takes away from my comic is a reminder to slow down. Modern medicine is a whirlwind of tasks constantly competing for our attention,

which, in combination with this inescapable demand for efficiency, can make patient care begin to feel like nothing more than a to-do list, a series of checkboxes just waiting to be ticked so that you can go home for the day. It's so important to take that step back and remind ourselves that these are people in these tiny rooms scared, suffering, and isolated. And if we take even the briefest pause to accompany them on their journey, to walk that path alongside them, it can make all the difference.

[00:04:10] HOFF: And finally, if you could add a point to this piece that you didn't have the time or the space to fully explore, what would that be?

JACOBS: The other important concept that I didn't discuss directly in my graphic or its commentary is that of narrative competence, which is the ability to acknowledge and respond to stories in a health care setting. I like to think of stories as the currency of medicine. In health care we give and receive narratives every day, and being able to recognize them and to listen actively and generously to them is a major part of accompanying our patients through their illnesses. So, when your shoddy plastic glove snaps, or you're paged away from a task for the millionth time, or you're late for dinner at home, recentring yourself on the narrative, the lived experiences that you share can help with that effort to slow down and to be present with your patients. [music returns]

[00:05:20] HOFF: Dr Jacobs, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today, and thanks for your contribution to the Journal this month.

JACOBS: Thanks so much for having me.

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*.