

Episode: *Author Interview: “How One Health Instrumentalizes Nonhuman Animals”*

Guest: L. Syd M Johnson, PhD, HEC-C

Host: Tim Hoff

Transcript by: 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 Syd Johnson, a philosopher, bioethicist, and ethics consultant at State University of New York Upstate Medical University in Syracuse. She's here to discuss her article, coauthored with Drs Hope Ferdowsian and Jessica Pierce, “*How One Health Instrumentalizes Nonhuman Animals*,” in the February 2024 issue of the Journal, [Health Ecology and Disease Transmission](#). Dr Johnson, thank you so much for being on the podcast. [music fades]

DR SYD JOHNSON: I'm happy to be here. Thank you.

[00:00:47] HOFF: So, to begin with, what is the main ethics point that you and your co-authors are making in your article?

JOHNSON: We argue that the One Health approach to human health and nonhuman animal health is anthropocentric and focused primarily, and too narrowly, on furthering human interests at the expense of nonhuman animals, which is not sustainable, just, or compassionate. We illustrate this in the article by focusing on the One Health approach to zoonosis and the strategy of culling nonhuman animals to prevent the spread of zoonotic and potentially zoonotic diseases. And this strategy identifies and conceptualizes nonhuman animals as disease vectors, and it includes killing both infected and uninfected and healthy animals, and is motivated not just by protecting human health, but also protecting human economic interest in consuming animals for food and for other products and reasons. So, nonhuman animals are instrumentalized by One Health approaches like this, and they're treated as means to an end and not as ends in themselves.

[00:02:03] HOFF: And so, what do you see as the most important thing for health professions students and trainees specifically to take from this article?

JOHNSON: Our recent and ongoing experience with the COVID pandemic illustrates how vulnerable our health care systems and our health care workers are to zoonotic diseases. And we saw those systems come close to collapse in several places in the world, including in wealthy, industrialized nations, where we might've thought we were not vulnerable in that way. We lost many health care workers, and many others are still

experiencing the effects of the pandemic on their physical and mental wellbeing. At the same time, we're also seeing the health effects of climate change, including severe weather, heat waves, and pollution. And while One Health as an approach to public and global health aims to tackle these kinds of big problems, it's currently doing so with one hand tied behind its back, so to speak, because it's simultaneously trying to protect human interests that involve unjust tradeoffs and require exploiting the planet and nonhuman animals. So, health care professionals will be dealing with the effects of those tradeoffs. And they have a stake in reshaping One Health to be less anthropocentric and more just and more sustainable so it can promote health and flourishing for all species, human and nonhuman.

[00:03:35] HOFF: And finally, if you could add a point to your article that you didn't have the time or the space to fully explore, what would that be?

JOHNSON: One of the issues with One Health is that it does not challenge the view that animal lives are expendable. And the stated goal of One Health is to optimize human, animal, plant, and environmental health, but by instrumentalizing animals, recognizing their value only insofar as it contributes to human health and wellbeing, we fail to recognize that nonhuman animals have moral claims to health and wellbeing in their own right and that, like humans, their rights and their flourishing are connected. So, to truly optimize animal health, we have to start from an assumption that their health and wellbeing matters not as a means to human ends or human interests, but because it matters to those nonhuman animals themselves. [theme music returns]

[00:04:35] HOFF: Dr Johnson, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today, and thanks to you and your coauthors for your contribution to the Journal this month.

JOHNSON: Thanks very much. It was a pleasure speaking with you.

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