Episode: *Author Interview: "Should Artificial Intelligence Play a Role in Cultivating Social Connections Among Older Adults?"*

Guest: Elena Portacolone, PhD, MBA, MPH
Host: Tim Hoff
Transcript by: Cheryl Green

[Access the podcast](#).

[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 Elena Portacolone, an associate professor at the Institute for Health & Aging at the University of California San Francisco. She's here to discuss her article, coauthored with Daisy Feddoes, "*Should Artificial Intelligence Play a Role in Cultivating Social Connections Among Older Adults?*," in the November 2023 issue of the Journal, *Health and Loneliness*. Dr Portacolone, thank you so much for being on the podcast. [music fades]

DR ELENA PORTACOLONE: Oh, thank you. It's a pleasure, Tim.

[00:00:48] HOFF: So, to begin with, what is the main ethics point that you and your coauthor are making in this article?

PORTACOLONE: The main point is that we...is that artificial intelligence can offer immense opportunities to foster social integration among isolated older adults. And so, in the article, we discuss possible examples, possible scenarios. And this point is quite innovative because often we think of artificial intelligence as a way to increase efficiencies and also as a way to be more isolated with different, with all of these technologies and machines. But in this article, Daisy and I are taking an approach, are taking a positive outlook to artificial intelligence, saying that if it is used and designed in a very smart and creative way, then it can really foster social relations among human beings.

[00:02:09] HOFF: And what do you see as the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to take from your article?

PORTACOLONE: Well, number one, I would like them to use this article as a way to think critically and think outside the box and think also creatively and positively, because it's very easy to jump to the conclusion that oh, artificial intelligence is going to make us more and more isolated. And also, artificial intelligence could monitor, these technologies could monitor people with dementia unknowingly. So, there are many ethical issues that also we touched in the article. But it's also, as I said earlier, it's also full of potential. So, my hope is that they just, they use it to think creatively, of course, about artificial intelligence, but also to think creatively about any other topics that they are passionate about.

[00:03:28] 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?

PORTACOLONE: [laughs] When I was writing the article with Daisy, I had a bit of an epiphany when I wrote, it's very at the end, when I realized that artificial intelligence is progressing much more faster than pharmaceuticals. Right now, in the summer of 2023,

there is a lot of buzz going around these new medications that are only delaying dementia by just a few months. And even though because there has not been any progress in the field of pharmaceutical for dementia, there's been a lot of talk about these drugs, even though they are not that effective. They're effective only for certain people and in a very limited way. And so, while I was writing the article, I said, wow. While the drugs, the progress of these drugs is supposed to delay or reverse cognitive impairment is going super slow and with a lot of debates and a lot of risks, artificial intelligence is moving at the speed of light and is very unregulated, and a lot of persons are thinking on how to harness it in many different ways.

And so, my takeaway is that, wow, maybe if artificial intelligence can be much more effective than pharmaceuticals to support isolated older adults with dementia, especially the older adults with dementia who live alone in the US. My research group estimated, our team at UCSF, estimated that 4.3 million older adults could live alone with cognitive impairment in the US, which is almost the size of Los Angeles in California. And so, my takeaway is that, yes, that artificial intelligence can be used if used extremely ethically and with the involvement of users, in this case, older adults who live alone with dementia, then could make a big difference. [theme music returns] As I ended the article, I wrote, "The sky is really the limit."

[00:06:20] HOFF: Dr Portacolone, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today, and thanks to you and your coauthor for your contribution to the Journal this month.

PORTACOLONE: You're welcome, Tim. Thank you very much for inviting 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.*