

Episode: *Author Interview: “What Should Students and Trainees Be Taught About Turfing and Where Patients Belong?”*

Guest: Gillian R. Schmitz, MD

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 Gillian Schmitz, an associate professor in the Department of Military and Emergency Medicine at the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Maryland. She’s here to discuss her article, coauthored with Dr Robert Strauss, “*What Should Students and Trainees Be Taught About Turfing and Where Patients Belong?*,” in the December 2023 issue of the Journal, [Belonging, Placement, and Turfing](#). Dr Schmitz, thank you so much for being on the podcast. [music fades]

DR GILLIAN SCHMITZ: Good morning, Tim. Thank you so much for having me today.

[00:00:51] HOFF: So, to begin with, what’s the main ethics point that you and Dr Strauss are making in this article?

SCHMITZ: It’s really focused on belonging and making sure that people understand the indications for admitting a patient, for providing medical services, and also knowing ethically, legally, financially, when that is not appropriate. And I think the term “turfing” has really been used as a colloquialism to really mean essentially, “I’m not going to take care of this patient.” And sometimes that is what we call “dumping,” trying to push that patient off onto another physician or provider, but sometimes there are legitimate and ethically sound reasons for asking a different provider to help take care of that patient. And I think in this era of burnout and just work avoidance and trying to balance so many different factors, people have a lot of questions about why patients are being deferred and why they’re maybe not taking care of that patient or taking primary responsibility. And so, this was really meant to address sort of the ethical issues around deferral of care and really differentiating when those circumstances are actually turfing, which is more of a negative tone, I think, of deferring care versus when is it really the right thing to do for the patient.

[00:02:13] HOFF: And so, what’s the most important thing for health professions students and trainees specifically to take from your article?

SCHMITZ: I think it’s one, to understand the importance of EMTALA. EMTALA is a federal law that was passed in 1986 that says that we can’t not take care of patients; we can’t turf them based on their inability to pay. And this applies not only to the emergency department, but to all physicians who are consultants and taking care of those patients, that we have an ethical obligation to take care of anyone, anywhere, anytime when they present with an acute medical condition to be able to stabilize them.

But I think the second important thing that we’re hoping that people take home from that is that there are actually many legitimate causes and reasons why a physician may defer care, and it’s important for people to understand that not every single time a patient is deferred is it truly a dump or a turf. And there may be several different indications and reasons why a physician is asking you to help take care of that patient instead of them. And it may not necessarily indicate that it is a deflection of responsibility or an abdication of their medical skills, but rather what’s really in the best interest of the patient. And so, this is really meant to present a framework, both of the legal ramifications of that EMTALA law, but also the ethical standards involved in when you’re deciding

how this patient is going to be managed and who should be taking primary responsibility. [theme music returns]

[00:03:45] HOFF: Dr Schmitz, 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.

SCHMITZ: Thank you so much for your time.

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*.