

Episode: *Author Interview: “How Racism and ‘Tropical Medicine’ Built the Panama Canal”*

Guest: Jorie Braunold, MLIS

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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 Jorie Braunold, the archivist for the American Medical Association in Chicago. She’s here to discuss her article, “How Racism and ‘Tropical Medicine’ Built the Panama Canal,” in the February 2024 issue of the Journal, [Health Ecology and Disease Transmission](#). Jorie, great to have you back on the podcast. [music fades]

JORIE BRAUNOLD: Thank you for having me.

[00:00:40] HOFF: So, what is the main ethics point of your article?

BRAUNOLD: So look, we talk about how institutional racism is baked into Western medicine and the medical establishment, but what does that mean? What is a concrete example? But I think this is a really good one. It shows how much the medical establishment was involved in colonialism and imperialism. In this case, they were actually directly responsible for creating the conditions which allowed the American empire to expand into Latin America. And it’s not just that the incentives here align so that the doctors wanted to find a cure for these diseases, and the US wanted to conquer inhospitable territory, although we can assume that the US government was probably only willing to provide so many resources to this cause because there was money to be made from it. But the medical establishment, they were aware of and supportive of this outcome.

In 1909, Gorgas gives a speech to the AMA called *The Conquest of the Tropics for the White Race*, and it’s pretty much what you would expect of a speech with that title. That was a lot of the language they used at the time. There was a belief in both imperial governments and in Western medicine that things like the environment or illness could be conquered, and that’s the language they would use—which has very colonial connotations—but that it would take the white race to conquer it.

[00:01:59] HOFF: And so, what do you see as the most important thing for current-day health professions students and trainees to take from this article?

BRAUNOLD: I think it's important to learn the lesson of the role of bias and white supremacy as they played out here. So, initially, before the mosquito vector theory was proven, the dominant belief was that the cause of these diseases was miasma, which is basically bad air. And so, the Western doctors believed that not only were Indigenous people lazier or less sanitary or healthy or whatever else, they also believed that the very air they breathed was poisonous. And once they learned the truth that it was mosquitoes carrying the diseases and not air, they applied the principles of mosquito eradication only to the white areas, and they also only provided white laborers the adequate time to recover. So, naturally, the Indigenous workers continued to die at a much higher rate. And so, instead of going all the way to the obvious conclusion, they stopped and said, well, clearly it means this only works for white people, and it just proves that we're naturally healthier. So, you can see how when they were getting closer to the reality of how disease worked, they were also in some ways getting farther away. And it's a good example of how their biases and preconceptions made it harder to make real progress.

[00:03:17] HOFF: And finally, if you could add a point to this article that you didn't have the time or the space to fully explore, what would that be?

BRAUNOLD: So, I wasn't really able to get into the role the AMA played in all this, but they were really active in advocating for Gorgas and his work. *JAMA* covered his work extensively, and Gorgas was a prominent member of the AMA. He actually became president in 1908 while he was still working on the canal, although he was no longer based in Panama. In 1902, while he was still in Cuba, the AMA started pressing Roosevelt to include him or someone like him with medical qualifications to be part of the Isthmian Canal Commission, as it was called. At first, Roosevelt refused, and then he kind of finally half relented and allowed Gorgas to go, but just in an advisory capacity with no real authority. The AMA kept pushing. They waged an editorial campaign and continued to lobby to get more funding and authority for Gorgas's position, and ultimately, they were successful. [theme music returns] And that's how this campaign became the most expensive public health campaign in history up to that point.

[00:04:20] HOFF: Jorie, thank you so much for being back on the podcast, and thank you, as always, for your contributions to the Journal.

BRAUNOLD: Thanks so much.

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*.