

Episode: *Author Interview: “Uptown Squirrel Does Not Eat That”*

Guest: Christy A. Rentmeester, PhD

Host: Tim Hoff

Transcript: Cheryl Green

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[bright theme music]

[00:00:03] 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 Christy A.

Rentmeester, the managing editor of the *AMA Journal of Ethics*. She's here to discuss her article, "*Uptown Squirrel Does Not Eat That*," in the May 2024 issue of the Journal, [Antimicrobial Resistance](#). Dr Rentmeester, thank you so much for being back on the podcast. [music fades]

DR CHRISTY RENTMEESTER: Thanks, Tim.

[00:00:38] HOFF: So, what's the main ethics point of this article?

RENTMEESTER: Tim, have you ever heard of Chix Mix?

HOFF: I have not.

RENTMEESTER: Well, until recently I hadn't either. Chix Mix is apparently what one prominent agribusiness industrialist feeds their chickens. This agribusiness giant would like us to know that their chicken feed is antibiotics free, and that for a limited time, we were invited to order some for free. To eat.

HOFF: Hmm.

RENTMEESTER: So, giants of agribusiness are pressed to respond to controversy about how their chickens are treated, and they are pressed to respond to controversy about their practices of non-selectively overusing antimicrobials. And offering Chix Mix to the world is apparently one of their strategies for responding to those controversies. But there's ethics trouble with Chix Mix, and the ethics trouble in this case is actually logic trouble. And that is this. There's really no sensible relationship between eating a seasoned version of this company's chicken feed and mitigating human health threats of antimicrobial resistance that's exacerbated by nonselective overuse of antimicrobials. And an additional ethics trouble with this product is that it actually tells us very little, if anything, about this company's actual antimicrobial use practices. So what I suggest in this article is that this company's comfort with making this a joke is really far more deeply ethically problematic than the jocular tone of the Chix Mix packaging lets on. So, we know, for example, that the United States Department of Agriculture and the World

Health Organization widely acknowledge that agribusiness antimicrobial uses are real sources of threat to human and non-human health.

[00:03:10] HOFF: And so, what do you see as the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to take from this article?

RENTMEESTER: Well, we need to resist being distracted by Chix Mix as a free, fun, novelty product, and we have to remember how urgent and severe a threat antimicrobial resistance really is. Some health professions students have many, many things marketed to them for free. And while it's nice when things come easily to us, we have to remember, we have to remember how ethically and clinically important it is to recognize that accepting free things can suggest to some very powerful companies and industries some very important things about your character, namely how cheaply your participation and complicity can be bought. So this is really a key characterological and ethics idea in the professional formation of students and trainees.

[00:04:22] HOFF: And finally, if you could add something to this article that you didn't have the time or space for, what would that be?

RENTMEESTER: We are told that Chix Mix is "chicken feed that's good enough for humans." Good enough? So we should really pause about those two words. So, we need to ask ourselves, hmm, what must this company think about its ability to persuade us to put things in our mouths just because they're free? So I would add that there is moral, psychological value to feeling outraged by the suggestion that you'll eat anything if it's free or do anything in exchange for something allegedly gifted to you. There's a substantial anthropological literature on how gifts are used to curry favor and to control the behavior of some of our society's most trusted professionals, including health professionals. So, the analogies between the agribusiness industry and the pharmaceutical industry are perhaps apt here, so we probably need to be more outraged by nutritionally poor food that is aggressively marketed to us, especially for reasons that don't really make sense. [theme music returns]

[00:05:46] HOFF: Dr Rentmeester, thank you, as always, for your time on the podcast and for your contribution to the Journal this month.

RENTMEESTER: Thanks, Tim.

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*.