

Episode: *Author Interview: “When Should Patients at the End of Life Get Antimicrobials?”*

Guest: Noah Boton, MD

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 Noah Boton, a senior infectious disease fellow at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, Massachusetts. He’s here to discuss his article, coauthored with Dr Jeffrey Larnard, “*When Should Patients at the End of Life Get Antimicrobials?*,” in the June 2024 issue of the Journal, [Antimicrobial Stewardship](#). Dr Boton, thank you so much for being on the podcast.

DR NOAH BOTON: Thank you for having me. It’s great to be here. [music fades]

[00:00:45] HOFF: So, what’s the main ethics point that you and your co-author are making in your article?

BOTON: So, the key ethics point that we wanted to make is that decisions regarding antimicrobial use at the end of life is about finding the right balance between doing good for the patient, avoiding harm, enabling patients to have autonomy, and also thinking about the bigger-picture issues like antimicrobial resistance. First and foremost, these decisions should be patient centered and aligned with the patient’s goals of care. If an antibiotic relieves a patient’s pain or discomfort, then that is a good reason to prescribe antibiotics. But as infectious disease specialists, we frequently see adverse events caused by antibiotics and also frequently see patients who are prescribed antibiotics when there’s no clear underlying infection or no clear benefit, and this can go against the patient’s goals. It is also important to talk to patients early on about antibiotic use, especially in those who will be more prone to infections, to get a sense of what they would want. This will give our patients a stronger voice in their care. And there’s a larger societal issue of antimicrobial resistance from antibiotic overuse. And this is definitely a complicated issue with a lot of factors at play. It’s not a reason to stop giving antibiotics to those who really need it at the end of their lives, but it does have a place in medical and ethical reasoning.

[00:02:04] HOFF: And so, what’s the most important thing for health professions students and trainees specifically to take from this article?

BOTON: What I want students and trainees to take away from this article is that arriving at a decision to start or continue giving antibiotics to patients at the end of life is really a process of medical and ethical reasoning, and not just a simple yes or no decision. Every case is different, from the underlying disease process, clinical scenario, and the values and goals of the patients and their families. As I just spoke about, this is a nuanced decision. It takes time to learn about the patient, to determine what are the potential benefits and harms, and also to consider broader societal implications of antibiotic use for individual patients. I also want students and trainees to know that, like other decisions we make with our patients, we do rely on evidence and science to guide us. In this case, for patients at the end of life, we aren't often blessed with guidelines and studies to help guide us in our decisions. And I think this is another reason why ethical reasoning can be so impactful here to help us navigate these uncertainties and situations that are often delicate and charged with emotion.

[00:03:14] HOFF: And 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?

BOTON: If I could add one more point to my article, it would be the emphasis on the art and skill of communication in end-of-life care. Making decisions about antimicrobial use can be deeply personal and emotional, and it's not just about medical facts. Rather, it's about understanding and respecting each patient's journey. I think it's difficult to explain the complexities of antimicrobial use, their potential benefits and harms, and how they play a role in making sure care aligns with your patient's goals. But I want to highlight a recently published review in *Clinical Infectious Diseases* by Dr Carlin and his colleagues, and they really go into great detail on how to communicate with patients and other medical providers about antimicrobial use at the end of life. [theme music returns]

[00:04:08] HOFF: Dr Boton, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today and for your and your co-author's contribution to the Journal this month.

BOTON: Thanks again for having me here. It's my pleasure.

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*.