

Episode: *Author Interview: “Lessons From the Political History of Epidemiology for Divisive Times”*

Guest: H. K. Quinn Valier, PhD

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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 Quinn Valier, a research associate professor in the Tilman Fertitta Family College of Medicine and the director of student engagement for population health at the University of Houston in Texas. She's here to discuss her article, “*Lessons From the Political History of Epidemiology for Divisive Times*,” in the January 2025 issue of the Journal, [Epidemiology and Clinical Practice](#). Dr Valier, thank you so much for being here.

DR QUINN VALIER: Thank you. Tim, it's a pleasure to be here. [music fades]

[00:00:49] HOFF: So, what is the main ethics point of your article?

VALIER: Well, the main ethics point of my article really is to think or rethink about politics. And I know as we are recording this just before the election that thinking about politics may not be on everybody's list, top-ten list of things to do right now, and we can get to that a little bit later about politics and divisive times. But what I mean by politics when writing about epidemiology or science more generally is thinking about how science takes place in the public realm and how it's related to public policy. And so, I mean politics in that sense. And so, the article is making the argument that to engage in politics and science and in epidemiology is really important because public policy, the public sphere affects the science. And so, we are being affected by that science, and we really need to be aware of how public policy and social trends are affecting the work that we do. So that's really my main ethical argument is that it is, in fact not, you know, we're not talking about partisan politics here. We're talking about public policy politics. And so, it is critical that practitioners are aware of the context in which they're working and engaging with that context.

[00:02:11] HOFF: And so, what do you see as the most important thing for health professions students and trainees specifically to take from this article?

VALIER: I think the most important thing is to, again, understand the social context of science and medicine. And it's inevitable that science and medicine is going to have this public dimension because it's the most intimate part of all of our lives from birth onwards, right? And also, in terms of, especially in the US, this is 20 percent of our

gross domestic product that we're talking about, right? It's a multi-trillion-dollar-a-year industry. And so, to understand something about the past and how some of these sort of great heroes of social medicine and public health that I talk about, especially Rudolf Virchow and John Snow—although Johann Peter Frank may also be known to those who have an interest in social medicine—that all of these people are heroes to the cause of population health and public health, but they are also people that are thought of as being kind of ahead of their time. And what I would argue, a lot of other historians would argue, I'm sure, is that it's not really such a thing as being ahead of one's time. I mean, we can be a genius, right? You can be incredibly innovative, but you are of your time.

[00:03:37] And I think that there is something deeply humanistic about understanding that, right? And about looking at these incredible achievements that these men made and incredible advances that they promoted. But at the same time, they were also battling some things that would look to contemporaries to be very, very now, right? That they are in divisive political times, that they have opposition to their work and to their funding, and that there is a great deal of attention and sometimes quite vicious, vigorous sort of opposition to their ideas and to put that into the context of the now that when we're experiencing sort of difficulties in getting the signs across or encountering what we might term anti-science, that we've lived through these calamitous times before, and great work and great social progress has come out of that. And so, not to despair when we face that sort of thing in our own work.

[00:04:44] HOFF: And finally, if you could add a point to your article that you didn't have the time or space to fully explore, what would that be?

VALIER: I think really to talk a little bit more about this idea of politics and science as being somehow divorced, and I think that's, historically speaking, relatively new. And of course, I'm a historian, so relatively new is, like, still 40 years old. But there was a real effort in the 1980s to kind of distance science from politics. And again, I don't think that that was badly intentioned. I think that so often, when, just colloquially, when people are talking about politics and things being politicized or it's too political, what they're really talking about is divisiveness, right? And it's quite right, I think, that when we're practicing in science and medicine, that that's something that we want to avoid, right? We want to avoid divisiveness and that kind of messiness.

But again, to reclaim the politics as meaning to be acting in the public space, to be interacting with the public good, and to be interacting with public policy. I mean, these are all definitions that we seem to have lost and that I think scientists of the past were just much more comfortable with engaging in. [theme music returns] And so, I think really just acknowledging the extent to which science and politics are intertwined is something that I would've liked to have added more to in the article.

[00:06:12] HOFF: Dr Valier, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today and for your contribution to the Journal this month.

VALIER: Well, thank you so much for having me. It's been an absolute pleasure.

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*.