

Episode: *Author Interview: “Treating Patients in Non-Labor and Delivery OB/GYN Examinations and Procedures”*

Guest: Amber R. Comer, PhD, JD

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 Amber Comer, the director of ethics policy and the secretary of the Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs at the American Medical Association in Chicago, Illinois. Dr Comer is also an associate professor of health sciences and medicine at Indiana University. She's here to discuss her article, coauthored with Meredith Rappaport, “*Treating Patients in Non-Labor and Delivery OB/GYN Examinations and Procedures*,” in the February 2025 issue of the Journal, [Pain Management in Non-Labor and Delivery OBGYN Procedures](#). Dr Comer, thank you so much for being on the podcast.

DR AMBER COMER: I'm honored and delighted to be with you, Tim.

[00:00:58] HOFF: So, what's the main ethics point that you and your coauthor are making in this article?

COMER: So the main point of this article is really focusing on how performing a pelvic exam or procedure really requires informed consent. These can be really uncomfortable, painful, embarrassing, and anxiety-provoking experiences for the patient who's involved. And it's really of the utmost importance that we uphold a patient's right to free and informed consent for this procedure, and not just for having the procedure, but for how the procedure will actually occur.

[00:01:34] HOFF: And so, what do you see as the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to be taking from your article?

COMER: So, for trainees, there's a really important premise in this article that gets into the fact that you need to have free and informed consent for all pelvic examinations, even for patients who are unconscious and/or anesthetized. So there's been a common practice in medicine in the past where medical students would practice performing pelvic examinations on patients who are anesthetized because they were relaxed, and they wouldn't remember the experience. And so, from the medical professional standpoint, they felt that the patient would not have to experience the embarrassment and the discomfort that goes along with a traditional pelvic examination, especially when a student is practicing. So, informed consent was not always obtained. And the practice

of not obtaining informed consent for performing pelvic examinations for medical student practice still does occur throughout the nation. It resoundingly violates *The Code of Medical Ethics* to perform a pelvic examination without a patient's consent, even if that patient's anesthetized or unconscious and will not remember the experience or have any idea that the experience even occurred.

[00:02:56] 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?

COMER: Yeah, a point that I didn't have time to fully explore was actually the lack of state laws barring this practice. So, there is a majority of states that actually do have laws that actually prohibit the practice of performing pelvic examinations on anesthetized or unconscious patients, but there are still a number of states that lack this law. Now, just because something is illegal doesn't mean that it is unethical, or just because it's unethical doesn't mean it's illegal. But in this case, this is one of the cases where the law and ethics really should come together so that the law can protect patients, while we also have ethical principles that protect patients. And a violation of this magnitude can deeply harm the patient-physician relationship because it violates trust. [theme music returns] And trust is the absolute pinnacle of this relationship.

[00:04:03] HOFF: Dr Comer, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today, and thanks to you and your co-author for your contribution to the Journal this month.

COMER: Thanks for having me, Tim. It was really lovely to talk to you.

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*.