

Episode: *Author Interview: “Which Systemic Responses Should We Evolve to Help Surgeons Navigate Their Regret Experiences?”*

Guest: Ryan X. Lam, MBE

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 Ryan X. Lam, a second-year medical student at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas, who received his masters of bioethics degree from Harvard Medical School. He’s here to discuss his article, coauthored with Ruhi Thapar and Drs Eric J. Silberfein and Lorenzo R. Deveza, “*Which Systemic Responses Should We Evolve to Help Surgeons Navigate Their Regret Experiences?*,” in the March 2025 issue of the Journal, [Regret in the Moral Psychology of Surgical Professionalism](#). Ryan, thank you so much for being here.

RYAN LAM: Thanks for having me here, Tim. [music fades]

[00:00:53] HOFF: So, what’s the main ethics point that you and your coauthors are making in this article?

LAM: So, the main ethics point that we wanted to make with our article is to say that regret must be something that’s adequately responded to, because not doing so would likely diminish the quality of care that patients can receive. But what I said just then is more of a distilled version of the main point. In our article we sort of reached this through a series of steps where we first talk about regret itself, which is often thought of as some sort of negative experience that someone has related to something that they did or didn’t do.

But what we wanted to add with our article is to say that regret can also be something that is a result of outside factors beyond one’s control that prevents one from doing what one thinks is the right thing to do. And from there, we go on to talk about how unaddressed regret can lead to feelings akin to moral distress, and how these regret experiences and experiences of moral injury and burnout go hand in hand. And this is ethically important because these experiences lead to things like compassion fatigue and moral exhaustion, which ultimately diminish the quality of care that clinicians can provide to their patients. And so, ethically, it’s imperative that we respond to these experiences of regret so that patients aren’t being affected negatively by the regret experiences that their clinicians might have.

[00:02:23] HOFF: And so, what do you see as the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to be taking from your article?

LAM: The biggest thing I would say is talk about regret. Talk about it to anyone who you can talk about it to. Don't keep it to yourself and let it build up, because talking about regret can be channeled into a positive change. But even as trainees who might not have the same sort of leverage that a surgeon might have at a hospital, talking about regret just with each other reduces the moral burden of these feelings of regret and can at least motivate personal development and personal change as trainees reflect on why they had that regret and what they might do differently to maybe not have those sorts of feelings in the future. These are important ways to deal with regret as trainees.

[00:03:15] HOFF: And finally, if you could add a point to your article that you didn't have the time or the space to fully explore, what would that be?

LAM: I think one of the biggest things that struck me when talking about the things that happened in this article is conflicts between clinicians is a topic that's, I think, pretty neglected in bioethics education. At least when I studied bioethics, we typically just kind of learned about dilemmas as a situation where the clinician side had a disagreement with the patient side. And I think that conflicts between clinicians is epistemologically different, and so it needs its own sort of consideration. [theme music returns]

[00:04:00] HOFF: Ryan, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today, and thanks to you and your coauthors for your contribution to the Journal this month.

LAM: I'm happy to be here, and thanks for letting me talk about our article.

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*.