

Episode: *Author Interview: “Why Should Clinicians Care About Infectious Disease Existential Hazards?”*

Guest: Robert T. Ball Jr, MD, MPH

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 Robert T. Ball, Jr, assistant adjunct professor in the Department of Public Health Sciences and the Division of Infectious Diseases at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston. Previously, he was on the faculty at the University of South Carolina School of Public Health and School of Medicine. Dr Ball is here today to discuss his article, “*Why Should Clinicians Care About Infectious Disease Existential Hazards?*,” in the August 2025 issue of the Journal, [Existential Health Care Ethics](#). Dr Ball, thank you so much for being here.

DR ROBERT BALL: Tim, it's a pleasure to join you and all who are listening. [music fades]

[00:00:55] HOFF: What is the main ethics point of your article?

BALL: There are several points in this article. First, physicians—being trusted societal leaders—we're all obligated to be intellectually curious and keep up with not only scientifically valid medical information and news, but also societal news, especially political, not only on a global, but national and local level. There are also two other points. Physicians have an ethical duty to apply wisdom from our knowledge and experience and other ethical values to all that we do. The three theological or transcendental ethical values are faith, hope, and love, and four cardinal values: courage or fortitude, wisdom or prudence, temperance, and justice. Third point is that we must further understand these interwoven complexities of the various events in our lives, not just medical, but other, not only on a global, but national and local level. So many factors to plug into the equation of what we do and how we do it. My article is on pandemics, which can be acute or chronic, but we also have chronic diseases to deal with, such as dementias like Alzheimer's. We also have environmental issues. All of these require physicians who are educated and should be all intellectually curious.

[00:02:38] HOFF: And so, what do you think is the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to be taking from your article?

BALL: Remaining intellectually curious. I like to tell my colleagues and classes that you have to be news junkies. I like to include the ethical duties in what we do and teach, but also, understand that things are seldom simple. My article includes an interesting quote from the renowned scientist Neil deGrasse Tyson. I quote, "Scientific literacy is an intellectual vaccine against the charlatans who would exploit our ignorance." Tyson's quote is important for students and those beyond, because there is, in today's world, so much misinformation that it's hard to sort through. We must be especially wary of disinformation, which is the nefarious use of misinformation for personal or political gain.

[00:03:47] 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?

BALL: Good question. I would probably expand on wisdom and justice content in my article that applies to all physicians, all providers, and our patients in society. [theme music returns]

[00:04:08] HOFF: Dr Ball, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today, and thanks for your contribution to the Journal this month.

BALL: Thank you. It has been a pleasure joining 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*.