

Episode: *Editorial Fellow Interview: “Existential Health Care Ethics”*

Guest: Devin M. Kellis, MS

Host: Tim Hoff

Transcript: Cheryl Green

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[bright theme music]

[00:00:03] HOFF: Welcome to another episode of the Editorial Fellow Interview series from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*. I'm your host, Tim Hoff. This series provides insight into how our editorial fellows help to curate issues of the Journal and highlights important takeaways for listeners. Joining me on this episode is Devin M. Kellis, a medical student at the University of South Carolina School of Medicine, Columbia, where he received an MS in biomedical science. He's here to discuss his curation of the August 2025 issue, [Existential Health Care Ethics](#). Devin, thank you so much for being here. [music fades]

DEVIN KELLIS: Thanks for having me.

[00:00:41] HOFF: So, what's the main ethics point of this issue?

KELLIS: Yeah. So, for the from-the-editor piece that I put together, it's a bit hard to pick out just one single key point. But the two main things that article does is it serves kind of an orienting function to help make physicians and health care professionals more situationally aware of problems related to human extinction, and thinking about those problems from ethical perspectives. And so, a lot of the issue is focused on the ethics of human extinction or what's sometimes called existential ethics or extinction ethics. And one of the things that this article does is get the reader up to speed on a variety of historical developments related to the science and ethics of human extinction over the past 250 years. And this includes everything from the discovery of the scientific concept of extinction itself, as there was a time in history before people really understood the concept of species extinction. And it includes thinking about the first what's sometimes called kill mechanism for humanity, which is the expansion or burning out of the sun, and how different people, including physicians and philosophers, thought about that mechanism from ethical perspectives. And then we go on to talk about things like nuclear war and how extinction played a role in the eugenics movement, and how that continues to have some influence today in modern movements such as transhumanism and other areas of investigation in bioethics, and even preoccupations with things like space colonization.

[00:02:33] HOFF: And so, what should your fellow health professions students and trainees be taking from this issue?

KELLIS: Yeah, I think probably one of the most important things to understand is that human extinction is a real problem that we face, although it doesn't show up in clinical

practice pretty much at all. Thinking about human extinction plays both a direct and indirect role in determining both the health of people alive today and the health of future generations. And so, in the from-the-editor piece, I argue that these issues from global health perspectives, and the perspective of justice, are very important for health professionals, and it's also important to think about these issues, like I said, to balance the interests of current and future generations. And as health professions students, we kind of have an opportunity to build a new field around these ideas and figure out how to deal with the problem of extinction, really, from one of the first times in history, as it's only really now that the problem of extinction is understood well enough that you could try to find effective approaches to managing it.

[00:03:52] HOFF: And finally, if you could add something to the discourse in this issue, what would that be?

KELLIS: Yeah, I'll mention two things briefly. The first is that in this from-the-editor piece, I didn't talk very much about the planetary health movement. However, I think the main thing I want to emphasize is that in this piece, there's an emphasis on writings that are from the English language and also from Western history, but there's not a lot of incorporation of world philosophy or ethical discourse from other countries, such as Japan, where there was the experience of the atomic bombings in the 20th century, but also from other countries in the global South. [theme music returns] And I think in the future, integrating those perspectives into a more global ethics of extinction would be very important.

[00:04:50] HOFF: Devin, thank you so much for your time on the podcast and for all of your work in curating this month's issue.

KELLIS: Thank you.

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*.