

Episode: *Author Interview: “Whom Should We Regard as a Legitimate Stakeholder in the Accuracy of Information in a Patient’s EHR?”*

Guest: Steve O’Neill, LICSW, JD

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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 Steve O’Neill, the director of behavioral and mental health for OpenNotes and associate faculty in the Center for Bioethics at Harvard Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts. He’s here to discuss his article, coauthored with Dr Catherine M. DesRoches, “*Whom Should We Regard as a Legitimate Stakeholder in the Accuracy of Information in a Patient’s EHR?*,” in the November 2025 issue of the Journal, [Electronic Health Record Evolution](#). Steve, thank you so much for being here.

STEVE O’NEILL: Well, thanks for inviting me and having me here. Pleasure to be here.
[music fades]

HOFF: So, what is the main ethics point that you’re making in this article?

O’NEILL: Well, there’s actually several probably, but I think a lot of it amounts to the caution about using words carefully. We think there’s a lot of mistrust about are physicians always on my best side? Are they really thinking about my best interests? All those kinds of things and these kind of scenarios. And in this case example, it highlights a little about how this could be a greater divide but is really a chance for greater unity. But a lot of this is around the word choice that we use both in the visit with the patient, so what we say and what we write. And what a lot of patients really don’t want is they don’t want to be ambushed with information. Which is a little of what this case is about in some ways, is the patient’s spouse or proxy feels a little bit like, oh my gosh, this is going to taint the future for my husband with the way things are worded here. And she’s correct about that. So we have to think about how do we partner with patients around these issues, so we respect patient privacy? But we also respect our own professional integrity, if you will. So you don’t want to compromise either one. You want to kind of figure out how you can partner on both scores.

[00:02:11] HOFF: And what should health professions students and trainees in particular be taking from this piece?

O’NEILL: Well, I think for one, for the students in particular, you should always think about who’s your audience? Who are you writing the note for? Because one of the

things that we see over and over is that—and particularly when students are trying to impress faculty and they want to do well and all that stuff, and so you—is that really, is that note just intended for the faculty person or for their professionals or for their peers, or is it going to go to the patient's eyes? And if the patient's going to see it, are we writing it so it's both there in a way that is translatable for the patient and understandable for the patient, but also meets our professional obligations and their educational obligations with the faculty? So they can do both: impress them, the faculty, but also make sure we impress our patients with our thoughtfulness about all of this.

[00:03:07] 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?

O'NEILL: Yeah, I think that one thing, particularly in bioethics, when we think about when we get called for a consultation, there's oftentimes an intractable conflict. And the first thing that you want to always look at is you want to actually do a differential diagnosis of the bioethics conflict, which is a lot of times people don't do that. They go right into that. And for most folks, they have to learn to distinguish between what's a legal issue versus an ethical issue versus a clinical issue. And a lot of times we get called for bioethics consults when it's really a disagreement about the prognosis or the diagnosis. And those are clinical disagreements. Those need to be settled with the clinicians. We need to figure that out, because that's going to engender a lot of confusion for the patient and their family. So how do we work with them in those ways? And then how do we sort through what is an ethical issue? So that we can get that and try to find a win-win situation as opposed to on the law, legal issues oftentimes end up with a win-lose position or can end up in that way because someone's going to advocate for one side or the other winning or not. [theme music returns] So, in ethics, we're thinking more about how do you get to a win-win where everybody feels okay about it?

[00:04:27] HOFF: Steve, thank you so much for your time on the podcast, and thank you and your coauthor for your contribution to the Journal this month.

O'NEILL: Thank you very much.

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*.