

Episode: *Author Interview: “Reimagining Roles of Dietary Supplements in Psychiatric Care”*

Guest: Katherine Wu, MD

Host: Tim Hoff

Transcript by: Cheryl Green

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[bright theme music]

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 format for accessing the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Dr Katherine Wu, an intern physician at OhioHealth Riverside Methodist Hospital in Columbus, Ohio, who will go on to pursue a psychiatry residency at the University of Virginia. She’s here to discuss her article coauthored with Dr Erik Messamore, *Reimagining Roles of Dietary Supplements in Psychiatric Care* in the May 2022 issue of the Journal, [Underregulated Supplements](#). Dr Wu, thank you so much for being on the podcast today. [music fades out]

DR KATHERINE WU: Yeah, Tim, thanks for having me.

HOFF: To begin with, what’s the main ethics point that you and Dr. Messamore are making in the article?

WU: Well, I think we started off with what the Journal provided as kind of background, as dietary supplements in all aspects of health care, including psychiatry, are unregulated. And this allows, of course, different manufacturers of these supplements to essentially make a type of pill or nutraceutical or supplement—whatever you want to call it—with a different blend of ingredients. And they’re pretty unregulated in terms of the types of claims that they can say that these supplements provide as long as they kind of have a small disclaimer that says that, “This is not intended to treat or cure a specific disease.” And so, we were talking about how we would like a government-sponsored body to help regulate the composition of these supplements in order to reduce harm and align with the health care principle of nonmaleficence.

HOFF: Mmhmm.

WU: But in general, we kind of go on to say that this would be beneficial because it’s another treatment option that’s available to the general public who suffer from psychiatric illnesses. And that research should be placed into these supplements and their efficacy and their benefits and risks in order to increase the benefit or utility that they can provide the general public.

HOFF: Mmhmm.

WU: And we say that research right now, because of the way patent law and the FDA, how those regulations are designed, there’s not a lot of incentive for companies to do large randomized controlled trials on supplements. So, a lot of times we don’t get the robust research that can come with preparation and selling of pharmaceutical treatments. But at the same time, we like to bring up the point that even though there is lower quality of

evidence for dietary supplements for psychiatric conditions in general, that a lot of times these clinical trials have their own flaws, specifically like conflicts of interest. There is obviously monetary gain for pharmaceutical companies when designing and carrying out these trials.

HOFF: Mmhmm.

WU: So, kind of overall, we're endorsing a more comprehensive evaluation of the research ethics of these types of studies and levels of research.

HOFF: So, what is the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to take from your article?

WU: I think that the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to take away from this article is that you should do your own research and review of evidence when making decisions about whether or not to recommend dietary supplements for all indications because I'd like to think that supplements certainly have benefits that are akin to the quality of traditional pharmaceuticals. But if we are to treat supplements like pharmaceuticals in terms of utility, we need to really do our due diligence in also reviewing the potential risks and interactions just as we would for any other pharmaceutical. And of course, that entails then when you're doing a med rec for a patient, make sure to also take a thorough supplement history so that we can review the contraindications and such.

HOFF: Sure. And if you could add one point to your article that you didn't get the time or space to fully explore, what would that be?

WU: I think that dietary supplement usage is just one part of a growing field of nutritional psychiatry.

HOFF: Mm.

WU: And that it's obviously not one cure kind of for everyone. In the field of nutritional psychiatry, it's also used in conjunction with diet, food, and exercise for diseases such as major depressive disorder or schizophrenia. And there is actually some randomized controlled trials for the efficacy of diet, for example, on major depressive disorder.

HOFF: Hmm.

WU: And then there's a lot of really exciting research going on in the field of nutritional psychiatry, and I'm really excited and hopeful for what solutions it might bring. [theme music returns]

HOFF: Thank you so much, Dr Wu, for your time on the podcast today and for your and your coauthor's contribution to the Journal this month.

WU: Thank you. Yeah, thank you so much, Tim.

HOFF: To read the full article as well as the rest of the May 2022 issue for free, visit our site, [JournalofEthics.org](https://www.journalofethics.org). We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.