

Episode: *Author Interview: "How a Medical Orchestra Cultivates Creativity, Joy, Empathy, and Connection"*

Guest: Roma Subramanian, PhD

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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 Roma Subramanian, an assistant professor in the School of Communication at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, where she's also on the medical humanities faculty. She's here to discuss her article coauthored with Dr Matthew J. Brooks, *How a Medical Orchestra Cultivates Creativity, Joy, Empathy, and Connection*, in the July 2022 issue of *The Journal*, [Arts-Based Research in Health Care](#). Dr Subramanian, thank you so much for being on the podcast with me. [music fades]

DR ROMA SUBRAMANIAN: Thank you for having me.

HOFF: So, to begin with, what's the main ethics point that you and your coauthor are making in this article?

SUBRAMANIAN: So, this article talks about the experiences of participants in a medical orchestra, and the orchestra was conceptualized as a wellness initiative to combat burnout and workplace stress. So, at the heart of this paper is the idea that health care organizations have an ethical responsibility to address workplace stress and burnout. And also, that burnout is a really common phenomenon among medical students and clinicians, and it occurs when health care professionals, who we can conceptualize as moral agents, are not really able to enact the values that their professional practice is rooted in, such as empathy and compassion and integrity and diligence. And we know that burnout results in adverse effects like emotional exhaustion and numbing and desensitization, and all of these hamper clinicians' ability to engage with your patients and deliver patient-centered care. And so, the orchestra was kind of founded on this idea, that idea and research that shows that engaging in music and other creative activities can help to mitigate symptoms of burnout by reducing levels of cortisol and fostering social engagement and social bonding.

HOFF: And what do you think is the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to take from this article?

SUBRAMANIAN: Yeah. I would say really, two key points. So, when you read the article, you learn about the experiences of these participants and what brought them to the orchestra. So, participants talk about how they were looking for a chance to engage with music. Many, if not all, of these participants have played an instrument since they were in elementary school, and the orchestra gives them a chance to engage with that part of their life, but that they don't, that their professional life doesn't really give them time to engage in. But I think a key takeaway is that wellness is a highly individualized process. So, when

wellness programs, wellness initiatives are being designed, it's important that they be tailored to the lived experiences of participants and that they be rooted in activities that participants find intrinsically joyful and not necessarily generic self-care skills. I mean, yes, meditation and yoga and all of these self-care practices are important, but participants will get more out of wellness programs if they tap into activities that participants find intrinsically joyful. So, that's one of the key takeaways.

Another key takeaway is that, so, this paper talks about the Nebraska Medical Orchestra, which is a wellness initiative, and it can be conceptualized as kind of like an individual-level wellness initiative. But it's important to remember that in order to have kind of a long-lasting impact on combating burnout, there needs to be system-level change, especially if burnout is because of system-level factors like a very heavy workload and not enough job resources to kind of do one's work properly. And so, it's important to remember that, yes, you need your individual-level wellness initiatives are really important, but there needs to be institutional support for culture of wellness, of vulnerability, of peer support.

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?

SUBRAMANIAN: Yeah, yeah. So, one thing that I would like to elaborate upon is, you know, so, in addition to having creating wellness initiatives that are tailored to activities that participants find intrinsically joyful, also thinking more deeply about how to actually execute those initiatives. And so, we talk about this a little bit in the discussion section. So, we talk about how, yes, the orchestra does tap into participants' kind of creative need to play music, but what brings them back to practice week after week, even after 15-hour work days is the atmosphere that the conductor creates, which is one of empathy and vulnerability and safety and really, a space where they can focus just on pleasure and not on perfection. That is reflected in every single aspect of how the orchestra is conducted, from the way the music is selected to every single rehearsal, the way the participants engage with each other, the way the conductor gives people feedback. And so, I think, again, that's something to keep in mind because you could have a wellness initiative, but again, it should not turn into a situation where everyone is trying to do the yoga pose [laughs] the best that they possibly can, you know?

HOFF: [chuckles]

SUBRAMANIAN: And again, it becomes a competition for who does it best.

HOFF: Right.

SUBRAMANIAN: So, I think that's important to keep in mind.

HOFF: Right. Dr Subramanian, thank you so much for being on the podcast with me today and for you and your coauthor's contribution to the Journal this month.

SUBRAMANIAN: Thank you for this opportunity. It was a pleasure.

HOFF: To read the full article as well as the rest of the July 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*.