

Episode: *Author Interview: “Wage Theft and Worker Exploitation in Health Care”*

Guest: Nicole Hallett, JD

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 Professor Nicole Hallett, an Associate Clinical Professor of Law at the University of Chicago Law School. She's here to discuss her article, *Wage Theft and Worker Exploitation in Health Care*, in the September 2022 issue of the Journal, [What We Owe Health Workers Earning Low Wages](#). Professor Hallett, thank you so much for being on the show. [music fades]

NICOLE HALLETT: Thank you for having me.

HOFF: So, what's the main ethics point of your article?

HALLETT: Well, I think the reason why I wanted to write the article and why I think it's so important is because when you're talking about the health care industry, I don't think that there is enough focus on labor issues that arise and arise quite commonly, so. And I think the reason for this is because when you're talking about health care, the focus is really on the care provided, the patients, and that's perhaps how it should be. It's a service profession, and so it makes sense that the focus is on patient care. But I think what we learned throughout the pandemic is that if you don't also focus on employees, particularly low-wage employees, who are working in the health care industry, patient care is going to suffer. And so, really, when you're talking about our ethical obligations, we have ethical obligations to low-wage workers who are working in the health care industry, and we also have ethical obligations to patients. And those two obligations are very much intertwined, as we recently saw. So, what I really wanted to do with this article was get people to think about the employees and the workers who support their work on a daily basis and really focus on what we owe them in addition to thinking about what we owe patients.

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

HALLETT: Well, one thing that I wanted to really emphasize is how much exploitation is happening in the industry. I think it's really not very well known that rates of wage theft, for example, are extremely high in certain kind of sub-industry areas, and I think that the reason for that is because much of that exploitation is invisible unless you are suffering from it. And even if you are suffering from it, many people are unfamiliar with the various laws that might make such exploitation illegal. And the first step in trying to fix any problem is making sure that we are aware of it. And so, that, I think is perhaps the greatest takeaway that I wanted people to take from the article, is to just acknowledge that this is a widespread problem in the health care industry and to get people to start thinking about possible solutions.

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?

HALLETT: Well, I think since I wrote the article, this issue has continued to have very high salience and perhaps has come to even kind of greater public attention. We are still in the middle of what experts are calling The Great Resignation, and we see in many industries that there is a shortage of workers. And so, I think the trends that I noted in the article about workers quitting when they were not getting paid sufficiently or when they were being exploited in other ways has only continued and perhaps even gotten worse. So, I think if anything, this problem is more important and more salient now than it was when I wrote the article. And I think that your readers will likely, if they weren't aware before, will be aware of now, how the way that we treat low-wage workers is affecting their work as health care professionals. [theme music returns]

HOFF: Professor Hallett, thank you so much for being on the podcast and for your contribution to the Journal this month.

HALLETT: Thank you.

HOFF: To read the full article, as well as the rest of the September 2022 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*.