

Episode: *Author Interview: "How Should Regulations Help Health Care Organizations Manage Waste?"*

Guest: Ariel Levchenko, MA

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 Ariel Levchenko, a recent graduate of the Master of Arts Program at the Center for Bioethics at New York University in New York City and a research assistant in the Center for Medical Ethics and Health Policy at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. He's here to discuss his article, coauthored with Scott Schweickart, *How Should Regulations Help Health Care Organizations Manage Waste?*, in the October 2022 issue of the Journal, [Health Care Waste](#). Ariel, thank you so much for being on the show. [music fades]

ARIEL LEVCHENKO: Thank you very much for having me, Tim. I'm very happy to be here.

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

LEVCHENKO: So, I mean, I guess it sort of depends on your perspective. The main ethics point, to my view, is that we're just, we are not dealing with the waste generated by the health care system in a sufficiently considerate manner, and there are sort of two dimensions to this. And they have to do with, there's one issue of just justice, which is that essentially, certain communities and certain populations deal with the ill effects of health care waste in a way disproportionately to sort of like their generation of it or that compounds existing inequalities. And there's the secondary issue of just we're not being fastidious enough and ethically considerate enough of the consequences of the medical waste that we generate and how we deal with it.

So, to give an example on the first point, right, a lot of the inefficient and harmful ways we deal with medical waste like landfills or like incineration, those consequences are disproportionately borne by communities in globally impoverished areas or even locally impoverished areas in the United States. A lot of incineration plants, for example, are located in communities that are disproportionately poor or disproportionately people of color, which is a major issue of justice.

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

LEVCHENKO: I think that the most important thing to take from this article is that the way we deal with medical waste, health care medical waste but in general, is an issue that has a lot to do with medical ethics, but also has a lot to do with sort of like structural problems and political economy and the political ethics, this sort of thing. And that therefore, there's a sense in which just trying to apply the, just trying to think about things in terms of medical

ethics in a narrow sense is insufficient at times to deal with these sorts of questions which are related to the questions of medical ethics but are not sort of at first glance directly related. Like, you have to take a few steps to see how the issues of waste, for example, are related to medical ethics and why it is ethically relevant to health care professionals what happens to the waste, right? Because when you're a medical professional, you might not be thinking too much about the waste.

Like, "Okay. Well, I use this needle to do an injection, to do a routine injection or something like that, and I throw it out. And I follow all the rules that I have to follow about proper disposal, and I am careful and fastidious and all that. But once it's out the door, that's not really my issue." And in a sense it isn't, but in a sense it is because these are the byproducts of sort of, these are the byproducts of the medical profession. And because of the health care effects of improper medical waste management, it sort of compounds because you perform medical operations in order to have people, in order to cure people. But if the byproduct of that is more people coming to the hospital because of, for example, cancer caused by landfill leakages into the water supply or the particulate that emerges because medical waste is incinerated, right, this is sort of, this is ironic, and it's almost self-defeating.

And so, I think what medical professionals and medical students and health care practitioners should take away from this is that they need to, is that it is important to think a lot more globally about the impact of medical waste and structurally about like, well, what happens when that needle that you've used, when it goes out the door, and why it continues to be ethically relevant for you as a medical professional what happens to that needle as it keeps going out. And I think it's important, therefore, for them to sort of think about their role within the structure of sort of waste management and how a more integrated system would better serve the goals of justice and would more completely further the goals of medical ethics.

HOFF: And finally, if you could add a point to this article that you didn't have the time or space to fully explore, what would that be?

LEVCHENKO: So, there's an interesting point that is related to the discussion in the article. In the article, Scott and I talk about the question of how medical waste, the medical waste disposal is disproportionately ill or insufficient—, inefficiently handled in developing countries simply because they lack the resources to build proper disposal facilities and train personnel, etc. And part of this is because of the lack of a global regulatory body.

One thing that I discovered in my research that I didn't really have space to put in is that the problem at times isn't just that we, is that those developing countries don't have the resources to deal with their own medical waste, but rather it's that developed countries, richer countries, pay developing countries to basically offload our own waste, including medical waste, including health care waste into those developing countries, which is really compounding the problem a lot because they already don't have the resources to deal with their own, and we're just piling more on to them. And you might think, well, we're paying them for it. Sure. But the resources we give them aren't enough to deal with that waste, and it's sort of taking advantage of unfair advantages that developed countries have. And the lack of an international regulatory body is part of why this happens. It's because all the various countries that are involved in this aren't on an equal playing field, as it were. And so, even if we find.... So, I think it's important to think about the fact that well, we can find ways of dealing with health care waste in our own country by shipping it all over to a poor country, and that would seem to be hunky dory because we don't have to deal with the ill

effect of it anymore. But someone else down the line does because there isn't a global sort of partnership and structure for dealing with this problem. [theme music returns]

HOFF: Ariel, thank you so much for being on the podcast today, and thanks to you and Scott for your contribution to the Journal.

LEVCHENKO: Thank you very much for having me.

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