

Episode: *Author Interview: “Does Osler’s Aequanimitas Inform Our Contemporary Pursuit of Stillness?”*

Guest: James B. Young, 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 James Young, a board-certified cardiologist with interests in mechanical circulatory support devices and cardiovascular clinical trials. He’s here to discuss his article, *Does Osler’s Aequanimitas Inform Our Contemporary Pursuit of Stillness?*, in the December 2022 issue of the Journal, [With Stillness and Solidarity](#). Dr Young, thank you so much for being on the podcast. [music fades out]

DR JAMES YOUNG: Well, thank you, Tim. It’s my honor and pleasure.

HOFF: To begin with, what’s the main ethics point that you make in this article?

YOUNG: Well, first, let me talk a minute about William Osler. There’s been much written about the iconic nineteenth-century physician and his essay, *Aequanimitas*. Osler, in many respects, was a role model for us today. He wasn’t perfect. He was a man of his times, the Gilded Age. He would be a bit out of place in the hurly burly medical world of today with so much less hands-on practice. But the essay, *Aequanimitas*, addresses a key ethical principle in health care, and that relates to something which is irrespective of any age and should be embraced today by all caregivers. If we consider ethics to be moral principles that govern a person’s behavior or the conducting of an activity, the essay focuses largely on caregivers’ imperturbability and resultant equanimity. The essay focuses on the meaning of these words. “Imperturbability” referred to, “coolness and presence of mind under the circumstances, calmness amidst storm, clearness of judgment in moments of grave peril.” That comes directly out of the essay. “Equanimity” was a calmness or stillness, which is as important as being imperturbable.

Now stillness has many meanings related to silence and motionless, but also can mean emotional calmness, serenity, tranquility, placidity, quietness, and peace. And personal introspection and self-discovery can manifest as equanimity and lead to stillness. So, that then links to the moral compass that the essay *Aequanimitas* was trying to put forward as it relates to health care providers’ interaction with their patients.

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

YOUNG: Well, I think in today’s particularly complex world of health care, everyone, including all providers, students, trainees as well, must ensure an understanding of imperturbability and equanimity and stillness to not only meet professional expectation of

patients, but also, to protect oneself from the ravages of professional burnout and personal destruction that can occur when one gets immersed so deeply into the health care world.

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

YOUNG: I think an additional important point would be emphasizing the fact that imperturbability and equanimity, as Osler envisioned the theme words, were ideals that should guide our behavior and ethics of day-to-day life, not just our medical lives in the clinic or hospital, but in our lives more generally, our lives with family, friends, and daily contacts. [theme music returns]

HOFF: Dr Young, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today and for your contribution to the Journal this month.

YOUNG: Well, thank you, Tim. It's very much appreciated.

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