

Episode: *Author Interview: "Fat Norms and the AMA"*

Guest: Jorie Braunold, MLIS

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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 way to access the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Jorie Braunold, the archivist for the American Medical Association in Chicago, Illinois. She's here to discuss her article, "*Fat Norms and the AMA*," in the July 2023 issue of the Journal, [How We Over Rely on BMI](#). Jorie, welcome back to the podcast. [music fades]

JORIE BRAUNOLD: Thank you for having me.

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

BRAUNOLD: So, I think the key ethics point here is that since weight became something to measure and control, which was around the 20th century, when for the first time in history, food became abundant to the point of it impacting the health of an average individual, we've sort of struggled with how to measure and talk about it. The BMI is an inaccurate diagnostic tool and shouldn't be used as the end all, be all. But the real issue isn't the BMI, it's how we talk about obesity and weight management. In a world where people, or Americans at least, have to go out of their way, go against their basic biology to live lives that aren't sedentary, to eat food that isn't full of empty calories, simply telling people to eat less and exercise more is kind of cruel. But that's basically what we've been doing for 100 years now. And surely doctors have seen that this advice works for so few people. I read a study in *Scientific American* that said that about 80 percent of people on diets gain all the weight back, but we haven't really figured out a better way. And so, people feel like it's all on them, and then they feel lazy and ashamed and judged by their doctor. Because if it's a simple matter of calories in, calories out, why is it so hard to get that right?

HOFF: And so, what's the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to take from your article?

BRAUNOLD: I think the most important thing that they could take is that while, yes, we are less cruel, and in many cases, less misogynist in the way that we talk about obesity now as opposed to when we look back in the archives, we're still ignoring some of the core truths of biology. And one of these core truths is that weight doesn't equal health. There are models who subsist off cigarettes and coffee with low BMIs and obese fitness instructors. So, while obesity may be an indicator of unhealthy habits, it isn't so simple as high BMI equals unhealthy. Another core truth is that our bodies are wired to want to keep on weight, and once we've gained it, our bodies will do whatever they can to hold onto it. So, it's important when health professionals are speaking with overweight individuals who want to change their habits to know that it's not so easy.

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?

BRAUNOLD: So, I think one of the points I wasn't really able to get into in the article—I got into it a little bit—was about how the medical establishment in the pre-BMI days really preyed on women's insecurities rather than their health to sort of scare them into weight loss. There is one image in the article that speaks of slim, gracefully turned-out women whom other women look at with envy. And when women in society in general were told that their only real opportunities in life came from being attractive to men, equating their weight with their desirability implied that unless they were thin, they were essentially worthless. Which unsurprisingly led to unhealthy fad diets and starvation techniques, which the doctors would then poo-poo and act as if it was merely women's vanity. So, coupling women's looks with their self-worth, especially when there were so few opportunities to have a meaningful life outside of marriage, set women up for a lifetime of diet and deprivation and a very unhealthy relationship with food. [theme music returns]

HOFF: Jorie, thank you again for your time on the podcast and for your ongoing contributions to the Journal.

BRAUNOLD: Thank you for having me.

HOFF: To read the full article as well as the rest of this month's 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*.