

Episode: *Author Interview: “A Case for Federal Labor Legislation to Protect Underpaid Home Care Workers”*

Guest: Amanda Gray Rendón, PhD

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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 Amanda Gray Rendón, a 2021-2022, George E. Burch Postdoctoral Fellow in Theoretical Medicine and Affiliated Science at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. She's here to discuss her article, *A Case for Federal Labor Legislation to Protect Underpaid Home Care Workers*, in the September 2022 issue of *The Journal*, [What We Owe Health Workers Earning Low Wages](#). Dr Gray Rendón, thank you so much for being on the podcast with me. [music fades]

DR AMANDA GRAY RENDÓN: Hi, Tim. Thank you so much for having me.

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

GRAY RENDÓN: So, the main ethics point of my article that I want people to be thinking about has to do with labor and the obligation that we have to provide labor and health protections for those home care workers who are seen as disposable or largely invisible, so not seen at all within health care systems. We've made attempts to pass comprehensive federal labor legislation that have largely been unsuccessful, and this essential workforce suffers as a result, but so do the patients who would benefit from greater investment in Medicaid- and Medicare-funded home care programs. As we see in Texas, the waitlists are years long for individuals and families in need of state-funded home care support, and some people pass away without ever receiving the care they need. And this should not happen in one of the wealthiest states in the country. And this is an example of legislators simply refusing to provide adequate health resources for those families with the greatest need. So, this is a key ethical dilemma I want to bring to light in this article.

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

GRAY RENDÓN: So, I hope that health professions students and trainees will take away the fact that people need health care outside of hospitals and clinics, when they go home. And the women who provide this care have a skill set that needs to be valued. So, 90 percent of home care workers in the U.S. are women, and the majority of those women are women of color. So, when we're talking about who provides this care in our country, it is largely women of color. There is a long history of labor activism in the U.S. demanding labor protections for U.S. workers, and we saw New Deal-era successes that largely left out care workers and other gendered and racialized workforces from certain labor and health protections like minimum wage, overtime, collective bargaining, some of which

haven't been remedied today. So, Texas serves again as an example of how states refusing to value this essential workforce can affect accessible care for some of our most vulnerable populations. And it's important that we recognize the vulnerability of the families and individuals, as well as the workers providing home care.

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

GRAY RENDÓN: If I were going to add anything to this article, it would be to include excerpts from the interviews that I have done with women who perform this labor for individuals and families within the home. As an oral historian, the work that I do emphasizes the lived experiences of my participants, and I look to them as experts in their line of work. I've encountered many educated health care professionals who dismiss home health workers as unskilled labor, but there are women I've talked to who come from a health care background in their countries of origin, many nurses, for example. And they may not be able to practice nursing in the U.S., but they have the experience and skills that we should be promoting in home care. And this also speaks to the importance of training that's necessary in these fields and how important it is to protect patients and their professional and family caregivers within the home health care setting. [theme music returns]

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

GRAY RENDÓN: Thank you, Tim.

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*.