

Episode: *Author Interview: “Holding Clinicians in Public Office Accountable to Professional Standards”*

Guest: Wendy E. Parmet, JD

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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 way to access the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Professor Wendy Parmet, the Matthews Distinguished University Professor of Law and faculty director of the Center for Health Policy and Law in the School of Law and a professor of public policy and urban affairs in the School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. She’s here to discuss her article, coauthored with Dr Claudia Haupt, “*Holding Clinicians in Public Office Accountable to Professional Standards*,” in the March 2023 issue of the Journal, [Clinicians in Government](#). Professor Parmet, thank you so much for being on the podcast. [music fades]

PROFESSOR WENDY PARMET: Thank you so much for having me. It’s great to be with you.

HOFF: So, what is the main ethics point that you and your coauthor are making in this article?

PARMET: I think the key takeaway is that when clinicians, licensed clinicians, enter into public office with responsibilities over health, they have ethical obligations to the public that are in many ways analogous to the obligations that they have to individual patients when they’re in clinical practice, and most particular, the obligations of presenting information about health that aligns with professional standards. One other important takeaway is how serious this is and how important it is when physicians offer misinformation to the public in their capacity as health officials. This can have very serious impacts on people’s health, on the health of populations. And we’ve seen this with misinformation during the COVID pandemic, but the problem is not limited to the COVID pandemic. And so, it’s really important that physicians understand that when they hold public office and serve as public health officials, that they really have the capacity to affect people’s health in a very direct and dramatic way, just as they do when they’re treating individual patients.

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

PARMET: Well, I think what I would say to students is don't forget everything you know about ethics and everything you've learned about ethics when you go into public service and work for the public. That just as we expect clinicians to have a fiduciary obligation to put the needs and interests of the patient first when they're practicing medicine or nursing, the same kind of obligation, the same fiduciary relationship should apply when you are a public health officer, a commissioner of a health department. Except in that case, your patient, so to speak, is the population that you're working for, the community, the state, the city.

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?

PARMET: In the paper, we argue that health professions—and we're particularly focusing on the medical profession, but other health professions too—really need to take this fiduciary obligation to the public seriously and that they should police their own members, that they are best positioned to do this. What I would wish we could've explored more but could not is what that actually looks like, might look like, what it would mean for the profession to take seriously this fiduciary obligation and to, in a sense, discipline members of the profession who breach that obligation. [theme music returns]

HOFF: Professor Parmet, thank you so much for your time on the podcast today and thanks to you and your coauthor for your contribution to the Journal this month.

PARMET: Well, thank you so much. It's been great talking to you.

HOFF: To read the full article, as well as the rest of this month's issue for free, visit our site, [JournalofEthics.org](http://JournalofEthics.org). We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.