Personal Conscience and Autonomy
A Case Study: Physician Participation in Abortion

Introduction

There are few procedures within medicine, if any, that have fueled as much ethical and moral debate as the question of abortion. In the United States this procedure is available to women upon request in the first two trimesters of pregnancy but the participation of physicians is often a matter of the doctor's personal conscience. This lecture does not focus on the ethics or morality of abortion per se, but rather on the ways in which physicians deal with this procedure in their training, practice, and in the ways they advise and assist those patients who request it. Thus the key issue in this unit is the interface between patient autonomy and the physician’s own conscience.

Objectives

At the end of this unit you will be able to:
1. Understand and explain the historical perspectives surrounding the moral and ethical issues relating to termination of pregnancy.
2. Understand and explain some of the relevant medical, ethical, and moral issues surrounding the issue of abortion.
3. Explain what rights and limitations physicians possess in the exercise of conscience.

Preparation

1. Read the required readings
2. Read the Case Studies

Process

1. Class will begin in lecture hall with Michael Vetrano who will give an overview of personal conscience and medical decision making. Then Drs. Todd Griffin, MD and Christine Conway, MD two physicians from the Department of Obstetrics & Gynecology will speak with us about their own experience with these issues and how issues of conscience are resolved in our residency program.
2. After lecture we will adjourn to section to discuss the case study

Study Questions

1. What factors shape physician attitudes toward providing abortions?
2. What socio-economic factors influence patient’s choice
3. What training in surgical abortion are physicians required to receive? Do the same obligations apply to medical abortion?
4. If Ob/Gyn residents do morally oppose abortion, do they have a right to refuse to learn or participate in abortions?
How should physicians communicate issues of personal conscience while respecting the dignity and autonomy of their patients?

See questions specific to each case.

What questions of personal conscience do you anticipate in your training and future practice?

**Articles on File**

1. Obstacles to the Integration of Abortion Into Obstetrics and Gynecology Practice
2. Conscience vs. Conscience, Stanley Fish
3. Hastings Center Report on the Conscience Clause in Health Law

**Other Types of Personal Conscience Issues**

1. End of life / physician assisted suicide – assistance given to a patient in respect of their autonomy, See: Timothy Quill, *Death and Dignity a Case of individualized decision making.*
2. Conscientious Objection in the Military

**Additional Links and Resources**

- AMA report on Criminal Abortion, 1859 (150 years ago the AMA was a leading force against medical abortion.)

**Instructor Biography**

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