

Conscience-based discrimination in health care: examples

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists limits conscience

In November 2007, ACOG issued Committee Opinion Number 385, "The Limits of Conscientious Refusal in Reproductive Medicine." The new ACOG policy states, "Physicians and other health care providers have the duty to refer patients in a timely manner to other providers if they do not feel that they can in conscience provide the standard reproductive services that patients request. Providers with moral or religious objections should either practice in proximity to individuals who do not share their views or ensure that referral processes are in place." When a December 2007 policy publication by the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ABOG) linked board certification to compliance with ACOG ethical positions, life-affirming Ob-Gyns faced the potential loss of board certification and the loss of their livelihood.

Intern loses training privileges because of abortion views

Sandy Christiansen, MD: "As an intern, the opportunity to get into the OR was a great privilege, as most of our time was spent in L&D or the clinic. I was the only intern who declined to perform elective abortions, and I made it clear that it was because of my Christian beliefs. One of my fellow interns was frequently given the privilege of scrubbing in on Gyn cases. I questioned my chief resident as to why I wasn't being given that opportunity and she replied that Susie was working hard doing the abortions and had earned this privilege whereas I had 'refused' to do this work and hence did not get the 'perk.'"

Resident physician fired for teaching on abortion complications

(Anonymity requested): "I have been discriminated against during my Ob/Gyn residency. I gave a grand rounds (case presentation) on abortion complications and was fired for it. It was in San Diego, and I was a chief resident in Ob/Gyn at Mercy Hospital. I gave the talk at the Grand Rounds at the UCSD hospital. I was fired for "creating morale problems and insubordination." That was in 1980, but it is still happening. I was suspended by Kaiser in the 1980s twice for assisting teen clients who were being forced by their families to undergo abortions. I have been discriminated in my career advancement. Being pro-life is not politically correct, Directorship of Departments, fellowships etc are out of the question."

Nurse practitioner terminated over abortion referral issue

Stanley Koleszar, CRNP: "I am a Family Nurse Practitioner who has been discriminated because of my beliefs on the job. I do not refer patients for abortions, and at my previous place of employment I was reprimanded for doing this, and then placed on probation. I was told I was not a good fit for the company and that I had better look for a job elsewhere because I was going to lose mine. In all of this I repeatedly asked if there was something I needed to do to improve, if I was doing something wrong and if I needed to grow in certain clinical areas. I was told that this was not the case and that we just did not work together. I believed that this was probably a violation of my contract with them, but I really don't want to work at a place where people don't want me."

Registered Nurse faces job loss for not participating in abortions

"I am a Registered Nurse currently employed at an outpatient podiatry surgery center. Last week; I was told by my administrator that OB/GYN doctors had signed on to perform surgeries at our center. There is a very large Catholic Hospital across the street that specializes in OB/GYN services. So it was very strange that these doctors would come to our small podiatry center. Our administrator stated there was a possibility abortions would be performed at our surgery center. Three of the four nurses stated they wouldn't assist with abortions due to convictions/ethical beliefs. Our administrator responded with, 'If you have a problem assisting with abortions, we have NO PLACE FOR YOU here.' She stated, 'As nurses; you don't have a CHOICE!'"

Medical student may not choose Ob-Gyn because of abortion coercion

Trevor K. Kitchens: "I am a first year medical student in the beginning stages of deciding which specialty I would like to pursue. I am currently very interested in OB/GYN, but I am afraid of the relationship between this field and abortion. By the way, I am 100% against abortion, and there is no way I would perform one. Moreover, there is no way I would tell a patient that abortion is an option under any circumstance, because I do not believe it is an option. My concern is that I will start a residence and would subsequently be required at some point to give a patient the option of abortion, which I would

refuse. My fear is that taking this stand would cost me my residence position. Now, if that is what it comes down to, I will be glad to take the stand for Jesus Christ and give up my position. However, I would really like to be able to avoid this situation and complete my residence so that I could go on and serve the Lord in that field."

Medical student: no conscience consideration in abortion assistance

"As a medical student on my OB/GYN rotation I was randomly assigned to an OR one morning to assist in a procedure. No information was given to me by the intern or resident on service. I found myself witnessing an early second trimester abortion on a woman in her late thirties who was obviously distressed. No consideration for my rights of conscience was ever discussed with me; before or after this unfortunate circumstance. Medical students then; and even more so now; are expected to put up or shut up when faced with interventions and therapies they consider morally illicit. This underscores the need for the recent HHS ruling which mandates proper consideration of a health care provider's rights of conscience."

Physician: Rejected from medical school on sole question of abortion

"When applying for medical school in 1988; I was interviewing at [name withheld] Medical School in NYC. During the second of the two interviews; I was asked how I would treat a 16 year old woman coming in asking for an abortion. I stated that I would counsel her on the facts of what an abortion does; and that I would not be able to do this procedure for her as it would violate my conscience. I would further urge her to reconsider her choice. But; if she persisted; then I would give her the name of a trusted colleague from whom she could seek a medically safe abortion. That was the only question asked and I was dismissed without any further questions being asked. I later received a rejection letter from [name withheld] Medical School. Thankfully; my qualifications were recognized by Harvard Medical School and I was given the opportunity to attend there instead; graduating in 1992."

Military physician required to refer for abortions

Donald F. Thompson, MD, MPH&TM): "I entered the practice of medicine from a deep commitment to serve my fellow man, and have been discouraged recently as I have been required to participate in activities that violate my personal convictions. As a physician with over a quarter century of service in the U.S. military, I take my vows very seriously. Twenty-two years ago, I took the Hippocratic Oath when I graduated from medical school, but regrettably was required by military regulations to violate it within my first few years of practice by participating in referring women for abortions."

Catholic physician "blackballed from education"

"I entered Ob/Gyn residency at a university hospital, matching at my first choice of a residency. Within one month, I left due to pressure from faculty and upper residents, solely due to conscientious objection. I chose not to participate in tubal ligation and contraceptive prescription. I offered to refer all those interested to other residents and staff but was blackballed from education. I would show up at surgery, and the attending and upper resident would refuse to talk to me or show me procedures. A great amount of pressure was placed on me by upper residents. One was physically intimidating (no contact). The program director basically stated that I could do these procedures, or leave. I have a letter from him, stating that my decision to leave was based solely upon my conscientious objection."

Anesthesiologist must anesthetize for abortion as employment condition

Frank Block, Jr., MD: "One place that I interviewed for a job told me in no uncertain terms that they would try to keep me away from the abortions but that I would, in fact, have to provide anesthesia for abortions if I went there. (I didn't go there.) My whole career path has been focused upon finding places where I would have minimal hassles over my beliefs. I am happy to defend them, but I am not happy to have an ongoing issue over them."

Medical student castigated for pro-life views, shown aborted baby

Mark J. Heulitt, MD: "When I was a medical student, I refused to care for patients who were having an abortion and had to go through many hoops to have my rights to not be involved with this procedure be accepted. While I was a student on OB rotation, one of the nurses asked if she could speak to me in private and brought me to a utility room off the OR. In there she pulled towel off of a basin which contained an aborted fetus. She looked me straight in the eye and said, 'What are you afraid of--this is just tissue,' and told me to 'grow up.' I told her I would pray for her and left the room. I will never forget the anger in her eyes over my decision not to be involved with this procedure. The bias we face is many times subtle but poignant. We must practice our faith and stand up for our beliefs."