

Press Conference on Right of Conscience
Statement by
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There is a well-funded and increasingly successful effort to discriminate against healthcare professionals based on their deeply held religious and moral beliefs. In some states, pharmacists must dispense certain medications or lose their licenses. Students are denied admission to medical schools or residency programs because they are not in favor of abortion. Doctors and nurses are losing their jobs or a promotion because of their beliefs. The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ACOG) in 2007 went as far as to state in Opinion #385 that it was unethical for doctors to not refer for abortion and, when tied to the American Board of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ABOG) requirements, implied they could lose their specialty certification unless they complied.

Right of conscience is under attack and that is dangerous for our country, our healthcare system and every patient.

Right of conscience is not a new concept. It is guaranteed in the First Amendment of the Constitution. Before it was made more concise it read, *“nor shall the full and equal rights of conscience be in any manner, nor on any pretext be infringed.”* When the state demands we surrender our conscience, it becomes totalitarian and dangerous. Do we want our professional schools to ethically neuter doctors of all moral convictions not approved by the government? As Hippocrates knew and some have forgotten the moral integrity of healthcare professionals is the patient’s best protection, especially in a healthcare system increasingly driven by cost.

Not protecting right of conscience is also dangerous for our healthcare system. No federal right of conscience law has any enforcement provision and discrimination is rampant. Twenty-three percent of our 15,000 members state they have been discriminated against and that they don’t know where to report it. Many are not going into OBGYN, where there is a critical shortage of doctors, because they will be pressured to violate their beliefs.

More ominously is the concerted effort to cleanse healthcare of those that disagree. On National Public Radio a Planned Parenthood lawyer said to me, “If you aren’t willing to provide full reproductive services, you shouldn’t be in healthcare.” On another NPR program, an official ACOG spokesperson asserted, “You can believe what you want, but you shouldn’t get any Medicaid or Medicare reimbursement for anyone if you don’t provide full reproductive services.

If these groups have their way, hospitals could close and doctors, nurses, pharmacists could be forced out of healthcare.

Rescinding these regulations is dangerous for patients. They may soon find a sign hanging on the door of their doctor’s office or hospital stating, “Out of business.

Wouldn't do abortions" They have a right to choose a healthcare professional who shares their moral views. No reasonable patient wants a doctor doing a procedure on them with which they are not only uncomfortable but morally opposed too.

But this issue isn't just about abortion. Right of conscience will become increasingly important with other healthcare issues looming ahead – euthanasia, genetic engineering, human cloning and more.

I encourage you to read the Health and Human Services right of conscience regulations. They simply do three things. They educate the country on this issue. They provide a place to report discrimination. They require employers and educators to take 30 minutes to certify they have non-discrimination policies in place. What is so earth shaking about that?

The administration and its allies have raised a smokescreen that these regulations are too burdensome and will limit healthcare access. That assertion is based on a faulty assumption - that healthcare professionals have violated their consciences in the past and now will assert their rights. If that is true, their claim is clear evidence for the need of regulations. In reality, they are the ones trying to radically change the standard that has existed in healthcare for over 2000 years and is enshrined in the ethics statements of the American Medical and the World Medical Associations. As our survey shows, driving dedicated professionals, many who work in undeserved areas, out of healthcare is what will really limit access. Ninety percent of the doctors surveyed said they will quit their practices before violating their conscience.

These regulations put teeth into the law and insure patients have the doctors and nurses they need. Removing them sends a clear message, "It is open season on healthcare professionals of conscience. Discriminate at will." If anyone should understand the ugliness of discrimination, it should be our first African American President. My prayer is that he will wake up to what is really going on and let these regulations stand. .