

Burbank Leader

In Theory: Are a doctor's religious values important?

Should a physician's attitudes reflect those of the patients he or she treats?

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A study in the Journal of Medical Ethics found that doctors, independent of specialty, who described themselves as non-religious, were "more likely than others to report having given continuous deep sedation until death, having taken decisions they expected or partly intended to end life. ..." The study concluded that "greater acknowledgement of doctors' values "should be advocated when it comes to clinical decision-making." What do you think? Do you agree with the findings of this study? Are a doctor's religious values, or lack thereof, critical components of the practice of medicine?

Answer:

We don't like to talk about the subject of death and often mask it with euphemisms such as "passing away," and "going to a better place." So it is not unexpected that the issue of end-of-life care would be fraught with all kinds of ethical, spiritual and emotional baggage. Add to that a study indicating that a doctor's religious perspective may affect his or her decision about supporting the end of life for a terminally ill patient, and we can expect all kinds of strong reactions.

As a Unitarian Universalist minister, my perspective on this subject is that we are all affected by our beliefs about life and death, and that includes doctors. To expect a doctor not to be influenced by his or her religious views is unrealistic. The question here is whose religious views we believe to be the right ones. The bias of this study seems to be that those doctors who choose to provide deep sedation that is likely to speed up the death process are doing a "bad" thing, while doctors who do not do so are doing a "good" thing.

The critical piece for me is the discussion that the doctor has had with the patient. And the study indicates that it is considerably more likely that the nonreligious doctors have discussed the issue of end-of-life choices with their patients. One of the major tenets of the Unitarian Universalist tradition is the affirmation of "the inherent worth and dignity of every person." It is, therefore, my belief that the doctor and the patient are the ones who need to be in accord on life-and-death choices.

To prolong life for the sake of one's religious beliefs when doing so is not the will of the terminally ill patient is, from my perspective, a serious breach of medical ethics supported by the classical Hippocratic Oath to "keep them from harm." I believe that we should honor a person's desire to die with dignity, whether that death is prolonged or supported.

Rev. Betty Stapleford

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Of course what a doctor thinks and believes is important, and so is what a patient thinks and believes. "As a man thinketh, so is he."

Now I have no idea where that quote comes from, but I believe it is true: What each of us believes, or doesn't believe, helps to define who we are. What a doctor believes, or doesn't believe, should not disqualify him from anything; no such thing as a litmus test here. But so much in our lives influences what we think and believe.

The ancient Greeks said that a man was the sum total of his experiences. What has happened to us in our lives matters as to what choices we make. I was extremely fortunate to have had wonderful parents who not only took me to church, but who also helped me realize that there were some little boys and girls who didn't have mommies and daddies (we were driving by an orphanage at the time) and that there were some little boys and girls who would not be visited by Santa Claus some years.

Anyway, my parents' concern for the less fortunate has turned me into the "bleeding heart" that I am today, and I couldn't be more grateful. So you bet it matters what people believe, doctors included. But again, what they believe should not necessarily exclude them (nor include them) from certain procedures.

Rev. C. L. "Skip" Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

La Cañada

It does not surprise me that irreligious doctors would do things that people of faith would not, but this is the case in just about every walk of life. If a person feels no eye of providence watching their behavior, believes that no divine lawgiver wields authority in the affairs of man, then of course such a person will cross lines that believers may not.

This study reveals both a willingness to break the laws of God and man, in that euthanasia is also illegal; we don't grant medical personnel the right to administer lethal doses of dope to kill their patients.

I would say that God is in the picture for such people, it's just that they view themselves sitting on his throne. They determine when to take life, and not any higher power.

At the other end of existence, such doctors also make life-and-death decisions regarding the unborn. It could be argued that they are more likely to administer caustic solutions and sharp implements to end the lives of unwanted babies on their way to birth.

Murdering people at any stage of life is hardly a moral good, but if we grant the pagan doctors divine prerogatives when life begins, should we be surprised that they perceive little difference when it concludes? To them, life and death are merely options, not spiritual states. During the Holocaust, the lack of religious values among Nazi doctors allowed them to subject patients to horrible experiments with the same deadly result. Need we ask if religious values are important?

Given the choice, I'd choose a doctor that believes he must answer to heaven for what he does to me, rather than one who serves other interests. We'll have to see if the unfolding healthcare system is ultimately going to give us any choice, though.

Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church

Montrose

I feel strongly that consideration of a doctor's religious and ethical values, or lack thereof, should be a key factor when choosing a physician. While the particular religious affiliation of a doctor is not really important, in my view it's essential that providers of medical care have a reverence for God or a higher authority, and a recognition that not everything is in the hands of humankind.

I believe that this guideline benefits not only the religious, but even those who don't identify themselves as such. A doctor is in a unique position whereby he literally has control over the lives of other human beings. This immense power sometimes can be misconstrued, and often has led to extreme arrogance and a pompous demeanor. Such an attitude not only creates insensitivity toward a patient's emotional needs, but also undermines the ability of a doctor to develop and learn more about his profession. When a doctor's approach to healing is one of caring and humility tempered by the recognition that he does not know it all, then there is continuous learning and positive growth.

Even with our increasingly sophisticated technology and many advances in medical knowledge, we must all realize that ultimate authority over life and death is in the hands of God alone. A physician is given the right to heal — not to take life. Judaism teaches us that we are under no obligation to employ heroic steps to keep a critically ill person alive, and that we should let each person transition with dignity and a minimal amount of pain and suffering; at the same time, we are prohibited from doing anything which would hasten death.

Every single moment of life holds infinite value and must be respected. Let the almighty who gave life be the one to take it back to his loving embrace.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center

Glendale

If a doctor wants to impose his religious values — or lack thereof — he should advertise or make those values aware to patients prior to treating them. That way, patients who wish to be treated by a physician who is going to abide by the strict tenets of a particular religion or belief system may do so, just as those who do not wish to be treated by that physician may also have the opportunity to find another physician.

As a patient, I would want to know that a doctor is going to treat me within the best of his abilities, and that those abilities are not prejudiced by his or her religious values. More importantly, a doctor should be willing and compelled to treat me according to my wishes and values.

If it is my desire not to extend or prolong a terminal illness, I need to know that my doctor will support my life decisions and not contradict them because he believes that the framed diploma on his wall gives him divine right to determine my fate according to his or her own religious beliefs.

Doctors have tremendous responsibility to treat and they deserve respect for it. But respect does have its limits and one of those is assuming that doctors have God-like power to make decisions regarding the lives of others.

I would bet that most doctors do not want this power; and that furthermore, most want to serve and assist in making the lives of their patients as good as they can be. But with power does come corruption and so there probably are doctors who believe with some sense of self-righteousness that they can advance their treatment with a religious agenda attached. To this end, I believe they would be wrong morally, ethically and professionally.

Gary Huerta

Non-denominational

Glendale

It is difficult to come to a complete resolution on this topic when I only have the abstract to read. With that said, I would need to see the reasoning of their decision-making, not simply the final decision.

From the abstract, I am not clear if the phrase, "continuous sedation until death, having taken decisions they expected or partly intended to end life," means that these were terminal patients in need of relief from their pain. Or, as the abstract alludes, this practice was done on the elderly or terminal without consent. Much more information needs to be gained before I can render an educated opinion.

This said, I do believe patients and families have the right to receive a greater acknowledgment of doctors' values, and that the families should take the time to ask for it, and then make known their own wishes in writing. To me, this is more of a legal issue. Gathering the information that is legally the patient's or their conservator's is the practical, ethical and legal road to take. If a patient or family requests sedation for the comfort of the person dying, they have that right. If a physician makes this decision without consent, it is illegal.

Values are so very important to us as Christians; and human life is significant. Unfortunately, we still have to know when we are discussing a legal or moral/ethical issue on topics such as these.

Kimberlie Zakarian

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