

Protection of Conscience Project



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Planned Parenthood and “Anti-Choice” Rhetoric

by Sean Murphy

Administrator, Protection of Conscience Project

In 1999, citing allegations by un-named “individuals,” a Councillor of the Alberta College of Physicians and Surgeons claimed that some physicians who were not “supportive” of women seeking abortions were “rude and bullying to patients.”¹ Canadian Physicians for Life rebuked the Councillor for relying upon “polemical hearsay” and demanded that the College substantiate the allegation.² No evidence was forthcoming.

Three years later the Assistant Registrar of the College indicated that complaints about physician ‘moralizing’ were largely hearsay “from groups who provide birth control and family planning counselling to women” - not a bad definition of Planned Parenthood.³ First-hand accounts from individual patients were a “distinct minority” of the total.⁴

Planned Parenthood Alberta is now recycling the accusation that physicians who object to abortion may “scare” patients with “misinformation” or “impose their moral beliefs.”⁵ One of the problems with this kind of generalized smear is that it may be unfairly applied to conscientious objectors to abortion who follow the guidelines of the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta (CPSA).

The CMA advises physicians to “inform a patient when their personal morality would influence the recommendation or practice of any medical procedure that the patient needs or wants,” and to advise patients of their objections to abortion so that they can consult another physician.⁶ The CPSA does not require physicians to advise every pregnant woman that she can have an abortion or put her child up for adoption,⁷ but does expect them to provide information to patients seeking abortion so that they can “make informed decisions on all available options for their pregnancies, including termination.”⁸

In following these guidelines an objecting physician must, at all times, be respectful of the patient’s dignity, and must not be threatening, overbearing or abuse his authority by preaching or moralizing in order to influence his patient’s decision. On the other hand, objecting physicians can hardly be expected to present morally controversial procedures as morally *uncontroversial*, or in such a way as to indicate that they approve of them or are indifferent to them (i.e., to adopt a ‘neutral’ position). Moreover, the information they reasonably believe necessary to permit the patient to make a truly “informed decision” may be more comprehensive or in other respects different from what Planned Parenthood is accustomed to provide its clients.

A third party who was not present during this kind of exchange, especially an interest group like Planned Parenthood, might well stigmatize it as ‘moralizing’ and providing ‘misinformation’. Partisan polemics of this sort do not provide a basis for sound policy making.

Planned Parenthood Alberta suggests that patients who are unsure of their doctor’s position on abortion should contact the organization because it is compiling a list of what it calls “anti-choice doctors”. Asking the doctor directly seems a simpler and more reliable way for patients to resolve such doubts. If it is desirable to help patients find physicians who share their outlook on moral issues, it would be preferable for doctors to identify themselves, perhaps through the College of Physicians and Surgeons or professional associations.

In the meantime, if Planned Parenthood persists in its plan to identify “anti-choice doctors”, it should include in their list physicians who believe that their colleagues should be forced to provide or facilitate morally controversial procedures.

Notes

1. “Ethical Responsibilities in Dealing with Women Requesting Abortion Services.” College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta, *The Messenger*, Sept. 1999, Issue No. 73, p. 8
http://cpsa.softworks.ca/publicationsresources/attachments_messengers/m73.pdf (Accessed 28 August, 2004)

2. Canadian Physicians for Life, *Alberta College of Physicians and Surgeons challenged to think about conscience rights*. October 11, 1999.
<http://www.consciencelaws.org/Conscience-Archive/News-Releases/News-Releases-1999.html>

3. *Freedom of Conscience and the Needs of the Patient*. Presentation to the Obstetrics and Gynecology Conference “New Developments-New Boundaries”, Banff, Alberta, 9 -12 November, 2001. Trevor W. Theman, MD FRCSC, Assistant Registrar, College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta
<http://www.consciencelaws.org/Examining-Conscience-Ethical/Ethical23.html>

4. Letter to the Protection of Conscience Project Administrator from the Assistant Registrar, College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta, 27 March, 2002

5. Planned Parenthood Alberta, *Be Aware of Anti-Choice Doctors and Radiologists*.
<http://www.plannedparenthoodalberta.com/education/beaware.htm> (Accessed 28 August, 2004)

6. CMA policy on induced abortion, 15 December, 1988.
http://www.cma.ca/index.cfm/ci_id/3218/la_id/1.htm (Accessed 30 August, 2004)

7. Letter to the Protection of Conscience Project Administrator from the Assistant Registrar of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta, 27 March, 2002

8. College of Physicians and Surgeons of Alberta, *Termination of Pregnancy*, June, 2000