

Does Doctor Always Know Best?

Sandra Kathleen O'Brien

Minor Annoyance

In 2006, a sixteen-year-old girl in Texas, checking herself out (rather vainly) in a three-way mirror while swimsuit shopping, noticed a pimple high on her left leg. A few days later, she realized it had become a boil and decided to ask about it at her upcoming doctor's appointment.

Patient Rights Superseded

The doctor recognized it as a staphylococcus infection and given the possibility that it could be a strain of the drug-resistant bacteria, MRSA, decided to follow the [recommendations of the US Department of Health](#) to inject an analgesic drug, drain the boil, and give the girl an antibiotic cocktail. He informed her of the gravity of MRSA, but she declined the procedure. Given her active, vegan, organic lifestyle choices, she believed her immune system was strong enough to take care of the infection on its own. After all, it was just some bacteria! The physician did not take "no" for an answer and performed the treatment against her will.

Young Life Saved

I was that girl, and if the doctor had respected my decision to decline treatment, the infection could have caused severe muscular and nervous system damage. That is, if I survived once the MRSA reached my bloodstream. A sample from the infection site sent to a pathology lab tested positive for a vicious strain of MRSA, which according to the Center for Disease Control [kills more than 30% of those infected](#). It could be I am alive today because my autonomy as a patient was overruled by a physician.

But, Was The Doctor in the Right?

In my case, the doctor made the right call. However, things could have turned out differently: a severe allergic reaction to the antibiotics or lab findings not showing MRSA. Given my complete rational decision capability, the American College of Emergency Physicians' Ethics Committee Chair confirms there was [no just reason to override my decision](#). The ends did not justify the means.

Doctors' Right of Conscience vs. Patient Autonomy

If legally required to perform treatments solely based on patients' desires, physicians could be forced to choose between violating their conscience, denying patients their autonomy, or risking charges of patient abandonment. These all contradict the governing principles of medicine, as espoused by the [Hippocratic Oath](#). Physicians deserve a broad right of conscience, but how can this be achieved without decreasing patient rights?

Balancing Act

Finding balance between patient autonomy and physician right of conscience is an important issue in healthcare ethics. Patients, given sufficient decisional capacity, have an unalienable right to autonomy. Trisha Torrey, blogger at Every Patient's Advocate, explains that this includes [the right to decline a procedure](#), even in life-threatening situations. Similarly, the consensus in the American Medical Association's online forums is that physicians should [not be required to perform treatments they disagree with](#). Although this might require patients to change doctors for certain procedures, protection of autonomy for all would level the scale so both patients and physicians have true freedom of self-determination.