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If you want birth control pills, go to a different doctor

A Calgary doctor's refusal to prescribe birth control pills has triggered demands for her ouster from the medical profession.

Progressive Conservative leadership candidate Jim Prentice has denounced the doctor's choice to follow her conscience as inconsistent with "a doctor's obligation in a public health-care system." Apparently Prentice believes that a doctor should simply do and provide whatever the patient wants done and provided, regardless of the doctor's education, training, experience, conscience, and professional judgment.

This raises some interesting questions. If a doctor, based on her experience and research, believes that liberation therapy (dilating and opening blocked neck veins) is not a good option for patients suffering from multiple sclerosis, must she provide that therapy simply because the patient demands it?

What about a doctor who is convinced that anti-cholesterol pills do more harm than good? What if a doctor refuses to prescribe birth control pills because she believes, apart from any religious teaching, that they compromise women's health? Should this physician disregard her own research, analysis and conclusions and prescribe what she considers to be a dangerous product?

Does it really matter whether the doctor's belief is characterized as scientific, religious, metaphysical, conscientious, or something else?

Certainly a doctor's beliefs about what is, or is not, good medicine will sometimes inconvenience a patient.

But what would be the consequences of forcing doctors to abandon their professional judgment and violate their conscience in order to pander to patients' wishes? If the government compels doctors to supply whatever patients demand, this presupposes that a patient's knowledge, training and judgment is at least equal to that of the doctor's. And if so, why bother with a medical profession in the first place? If individual doctors don't have the right to reach their own conclusions as to what is good or bad, why bother to distinguish doctors from those who are not doctors?

These same questions apply to other professions and occupations. Would Jim Prentice (who is a lawyer) impose this same standard on lawyers who refuse to act for a client, or who decline to take a particular case, because the lawyer's conscience says that doing so would be wrong? Our legal system is as public as the medical system. Why not remove from lawyers their current right to refuse to advance a cause that the lawyer believes to be unjust? Should lawyers be permitted to inconvenience prospective clients by telling them to find another lawyer? Shouldn't clients be entitled to receive from a particular lawyer whatever services they demand?

The same question about a consumer's supposed right to be free from inconvenience arises in other contexts. Should a Jewish or Muslim butcher be compelled to sell pork to the public, just because pork is popular? Or should the citizens of a free society exhibit tolerance and respect for the conscience of these businessmen, and suffer the inconvenience of buying pork elsewhere?

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A free and democratic society allows consumers and providers to accept or decline each other's business, without state coercion. In a free society, the government does not force doctors, lawyers, butchers and other people to do things that they do not wish to do. This is freedom, and it sometimes causes inconveniences. But freedom cannot coexist with a purported "right" of patients, clients and consumers to use government's coercive power to obtain whatever goods or services they want, from unwilling suppliers.

People who cherish our free society understand that the inconvenience of not immediately getting what you want is part of life. We live in a society where people have all manner of differing beliefs and commitments. Part of the price we pay for freedom is that not everyone will wish to help you do what you want. You may need to find a different doctor, or another lawyer. You may need to go to a different butcher or restaurant to buy pork. People who disagree with you are people too.

If Jim Prentice respects the freedom of lawyers to decline cases and clients, he should support the right of doctors — and everyone else — to do likewise. That would be consistent with the free society of which Albertans are rightfully proud.

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