

December 7, 2007

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecology
Douglas W. Laube, MD, President
PO Box 96920
Washington, D.C. 20090-6920

Dear Dr. Laube:

The undersigned individuals and organizations urge the repudiation and withdrawal of the recently published position statement of The Committee on Ethics of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), "The Limits of Conscientious Refusal in Reproductive Medicine."

The ACOG statement suggests a profound misunderstanding of the nature and exercise of conscience, an underlying bias against persons of faith and an apparent attempt to disenfranchise physicians who oppose ACOG's political activism on abortion.

The paper indicates that ACOG views the exercise of conscience and faith not so much as a cornerstone right in a democracy or as a historic hallmark of medicine, but rather as an inconvenient obstacle to abortion access.

A few excerpts from ACOG's paper illustrate these concerns:

1. "An appeal to conscience would express a sentiment such as 'If I were to do 'x,' I could not live with myself / I would hate myself, I wouldn't be able to sleep at night.'"

By caricaturing conscience as a pitifully self-centered, subjective feeling, ACOG denigrates the objective sources of conviction. Physicians of faith base decisions of conscience not on personal whims and feelings but on the objective teachings of Scripture--the same Scriptures that have provided the foundation for the laws of much of civilization. A physician's conscience may also be informed by time-honored ethical standards such as the Hippocratic Oath, which for centuries provided a foundation for medical ethics until abortion advocacy censored its teachings.

2. "Physicians may not exercise their right of conscience if that might "constitute an imposition of religious or moral beliefs on patients."

This harshly skewed view of the exercise of conscience would have the practical effect of reducing physicians to pawns of patients, since in ACOG's view, conscientiously declining a prescription or procedure is tantamount to "imposing religious or moral beliefs on patients."

3. "Physicians...have the duty to refer patients in a timely manner to other providers if they do not feel they can in conscience provide the standard reproductive service that patients request."

This assertion contradicts a basic corollary of conscience. The same life-honoring, objective principles—"Thou shalt not kill," and "first, do no harm"--that persuade many conscientious physicians not to perform abortions also persuade them not to recommend someone else to do the deed.

4. "All healthcare providers must provide accurate and unbiased information so that patients can make informed decisions."

Normally no one would question this principle, but in this case, context is everything. Since ACOG has gone to court to fight laws requiring abortion doctors to offer informed consent information to patients on the risks and alternatives to abortion,¹ clearly ACOG intends to selectively apply this requirement only to pro-life physicians to force them to offer abortion as an option.

¹ American College of Obstetricians v. Thornburgh, 737 F.2d 283, 297-98 (3d Cir.1984).

5. "Providers with moral or religious objections should ... practice in proximity to individuals who do not share their views..."

It is incredible that ACOG would actually require a pro-life physician to relocate his or her practice to be close to an abortion facility. Besides the fact that this drastic requirement is selectively invoked only against pro-life doctors, it would also have the negative practical impact of removing desperately needed doctors from underserved areas.

ACOG's misguided and uninformed public statement on conscience limits is bound to have the effect, whether unintended or actually intended, of discouraging persons of faith from practicing or choosing obstetrics and gynecology as a profession. At a time when many communities are already suffering the loss of obstetricians and gynecologists forced out of their practices for economic reasons, it seems especially unwise to send such a message of ideological intolerance and religious discrimination.

ACOG's aggressive political advocacy for abortion has significantly impaired its ability to speak for all physicians and to judge matters of medical ethics without bias. We urge ACOG to reconsider and withdraw this statement as a step toward remedying that lamentable loss of respectability and credibility.

Sincerely,

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