



## remarks

**It's My Life!** One physician rejects being pressured to place the needs of his patients above his own rights. He defends his right to practice medicine on his own terms.

BY JONATHAN ROSMAN, MD



When I came to the United States from South Africa as a young doctor 15

years ago, I was excited. I was leaving behind an oppressive, racist regime and I was entering a country founded on the inviolable rights of an individual to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. I did not expect to find a political system trying to enslave me.

Doctors in this country do not seem to have the same rights as other Americans. We are regarded as public servants who are expected to sacrifice our time and resources to satisfy the needs of our patients—that is, we are expected to be altruists. For example, emer-

gency room specialists and anesthesiologists are already required to do “pro bono” work, and managed care and Medicare continually try to squeeze more effort out of us under increasingly oppressive bureaucratic oversight, for less and less reward.

Every doctor, like every other individual, has a right to work for himself and for his own enjoyment, and to make a ton of money at it if he can. As individuals, doctors have a right to offer their patients treatment according to their best judgment, and to charge such fees as they judge their

expertise to be worth.

Conversely, patients have the right to accept or reject that advice and services, and to shop around for the best deals they can get. Having the right to one's life does not guarantee medical treatment at the doctor's expense, but it does guarantee that every individual has the freedom to seek whatever treatment he wishes, according to his own judgment and his own means. Individual rights means the freedom to act within one's means; it does not mean an entitlement to the goods and services provided by others.

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However, not only have American doctors been stripped of their professional freedom by all the various oversight agencies (which include licensing boards, the Health Care Financing Administration, managed-care companies, peer-review committees, and more), but—more importantly—they have also been morally disarmed. Our intellectuals have taught doctors that need comes before ability, and that healthy and rich doctors have a duty to support sick and poor patients. They have taught doctors that the consumers of medical services (patients) are morally superior to the providers of medical services (doctors), just because the consumers are in need.

Bureaucrats have eagerly latched on to this altruistic idea, and have erected a maze

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of welfare laws and regulations to satisfy the needs of the poor and the sick, and to “protect” them from “greedy” doctors. Thanks to these controls, it has become difficult for doctors to think or to act freely on their own judgment. And it is the best doctors, the most dedicated and those least ready to relinquish their independent judgment, who have been the first to leave the practice of medicine when doctors’ rights were trampled on. Who will ultimately be left if this trend continues? To quote Dr. Hendricks in Ayn Rand’s novel *Atlas Shrugged*, “Let them discover, in their operating rooms and hospital wards, that it is not safe to place their lives in the hands of a man whose life they have throttled. It is not safe, if he is the sort of man who resents it—and still less safe, if he is the sort who doesn’t.”

To save American medicine, American doctors need to be saved from altruism. To accomplish this, doctors must vigorously challenge the invalid notion of a “right” to health care. Nobody has a right to an antibiotic made by someone else, just as he does not have a right to someone else’s car. Nobody has a right to have his gallbladder removed, just as he does not have a right to have his toilet fixed by a plumber. No one has a right to demand that a doctor treat him, but doctors do have rights, just as do auto workers and plumbers, to practice their profession (or trade) free from coercion.

To save themselves, doctors must proclaim openly that they refuse to regard themselves as anyone’s servants. They should be left free to enjoy their careers as they see fit. It is important that doctors assert their “moral” right to be free. On the issue of their rights, doctors need to be intransigent. They need to declare loudly, “It’s my life—hands off!”

Freedom is the dream that as a young doctor I was looking for 15 years

ago. It is still possible to realize it today if we doctors defend our moral right to our lives. ■

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