

Foolhardy to expunge conscience clause

From Dr C. K. Tan, MRPharmS

The recent article by Joy Wingfield “Should conscience come before care?” (*PJ*, 24 April 2010, p393) immediately set the debate in a biased direction. As phrased, it suggests an underlying premise that exercising conscience is contrary to

patient care. For many Christian (and non-Christian) pharmacists, it is exactly because they care for the patient that they refuse to deal in emergency hormonal contraception or abortion. In both cases the onus of care is on the more vulnerable: the unborn child.

Time and again surveys have shown the long-term adverse effects, physically and psychologically, of abortion and responsibility-free sex outside marriage. We may well argue interminably about the pros and cons of the issues but to suggest that those who exercise their conscience are not exercising patient care is absurd.

Conscience is not merely the mark of a free society — it is the guarantor of a free society. We imagine totalitarianism in terms of communist regimes and dictatorships in Eastern European, African or Asian countries but totalitarianism can take place in western societies in what the historian de Tocqueville referred to as the “tyranny of the majority. Rather than set a limit on conscience, one ought to set a limit on how a majority” should dictate to the minority.

Such statements as listed in Professor Wingfield’s article (not attributed to the author but suggestive of her approval) — “conscientious objection to providing a service may be an adequate reason for refusal of employment” and “requiring a commitment not to exercise conscientious objection in certain specified situations before entering the profession” — are troubling.

Are they meant to purge the pharmaceutical community of Christians and others who could not undertake certain acts in the light of their religious beliefs and moral conscience? Would it not be conceivable, in terms of the practical outworking of those suggestions, that potential pharmacy students and preregistration trainees are interrogated on their religious and ethical beliefs before being taken on?

There is the incredible thinking in some minds that a strong conscience is the sign of a weak mentality — that that person is somewhat squeamish and not living in the real world. History has shown that our society is free because of the work of those who stood against totalitarianism, political or otherwise, of any kind.

The General Pharmaceutical Council has shown wisdom and foresight, in including a specific conscience clause in the code of ethics. Human beings are distinguished from animals by their moral conscience. It would indeed be foolhardy to expunge the conscience clause because it is inconvenient to some. Increasingly in British society, atheist fundamentalists are censoring debate on a whole host of issues. The pharmacy community does well to remember the words of the writer Evelyn Beatrice Hall: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

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