

SaskEthics

An Ethics Newsletter for Catholic Healthcare Organizations in Saskatchewan

Autonomy rooted in respect for persons

Dear *SaskEthics* Readers,



Why do we care for people who are making bad decisions? Some version of this question has

followed me since I began my work as an ethicist. The short answer to this question is a brief statement of principle: because of autonomy. However, the more times that we watch someone throw away what we consider to be high quality care, the less satisfying this answer becomes.

This is because stating that we respect the autonomy of others is more of a conclusion than an actual reason. To take the next step and answer why we respect autonomy takes a little more digging.

The first reason is a practical one: we have seen what happens when people are not allowed to make their own life choices. Western medicine has far too many examples of physicians making life altering decisions for their patients without consent, ranging from experimental procedures, to sterilization without consent, and everything in

between. We want to avoid making these mistakes again.

But this historical reason does not go deep enough. It takes another step to realize that our respect for autonomy stems from a much more fundamental respect for the dignity of the human person. As the *Health Ethics Guide* describes it, “the lives of all persons possess an inherent dignity and worth that is independent of that which any other person or the State may bestow upon them.” In other words, we acknowledge a person’s autonomy because every human being is worthy of respect, which is a truth that grounds all Catholic ethics.

Our respect for persons extends to our respect for each person’s ability to choose their own path in life. There may be times that we disagree with the choices of others, but respecting them as persons also means respecting that they are in the best position to understand their options.

Consider, for example, a patient who has decided to discontinue kidney dialysis. There could be a whole host of social, medical and spiritual factors that influence this decision, but ultimately we would choose to continue caring for the person not because we believe they are



objectively “right.” Rather, we would care for the person making this decision because we respect that they are in the best position to make this choice in their own life.

If this feels too simple, that is because it is. Most of us can appreciate that dialysis is a burdensome treatment, but what about other situations where we cannot understand the person’s decision? What if the person refuses to engage in end-of-life planning? What if the person decides to pursue a risky experimental treatment?

There will be some situations where it will be appropriate to ask our patients questions to determine if there is anything

we could change to help them make a different choice. However, there will be other situations where the only way forward is to accept with humility that we cannot always understand the path another person is called to walk.

Have you had people in your care make decisions that you had difficulty accepting? How does your team manage moments like these? How would you want to be treated if you made a decision other people could not understand?

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Expand your ethics knowledge this summer!

Take some time to explore the growing collection of ethics videos on the St. Paul's Hospital and Saskatchewan Health Authority websites at the addresses below:

- ❖ 2018 W.F. Mitchell Seminar:
Early Childhood Experience Affects Brain Development
<https://www.stpaulshospital.org/news/early-childhood-experience-affects-brain-development>
- ❖ SHA Ethics Rounds
(only available on SHA intranet):
<https://sharepoint.ehealthsask.ca/sites/saskhealthauthority/departments/ethics/Pages/EthicsRounds.aspx>

