



# SaskEthics

*An Ethics Newsletter for Catholic Healthcare Organizations in Saskatchewan*

## Refusal of care is rooted in respect

Dear *SaskEthics* Readers,



**W**hy won't Catholic hospitals participate in MAiD, but seem to have no problem when patients refuse life sustaining care?

This question was posed to me by one of our care teams recently, and it made me realize just how important it is to understand why the [Health Ethics Guide](#) supports every patient's right to refuse care.

For centuries, health care ethics was guided by paternalism. The physician knew best, and it was the patient's job to follow whatever instructions the physician gave. In fact the phrase "informed consent" was first used in a court ruling in the 1950s. Before then, medical textbooks emphasized the patient's duty to respect their physician. However this resulted in many horrible outcomes for patients who were not consulted about their goals of care or how their values might shape their response to care options.

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, technological advances in healthcare

treatments resulted in an important ethical question: Just because we can do something, does that mean we should do it? And further, who gets to decide if we should do it?

In the Catholic tradition, There are two situations in which refusal of care is appropriate: (1) when the treatment will not accomplish its goal (e.g., if a lung is full of fluid, a ventilator cannot push air into it); and (2) when the burdens of a treatment outweigh the benefits (Health Ethics Guide, p. 62).

But who gets to decide whether the burdens outweigh the benefits? In Catholic ethics, this falls to the patient because we recognize that they are in the best position to evaluate how a treatment impacts them.

There may be moments when we do not agree with the patient's decision to refuse care, for example if the treatment seems simple and the consequences of refusing could be fatal. However, even in these serious cases, when we respect a patient's refusal it is because we recognize that we have no right (ethically or legally) to force care on someone who has said no.



When we respect refusal of care in a Catholic hospital, it should never be our intention to end our patient's life, and we must always be prepared to resume care if the patient changes their mind.

This is substantially different from MAiD, where the intention is to end the person's life. Intentionally ending the life of another person, for any reason, is incompatible with Catholic ethics.

With all of this said, it is never easy to hear someone say 'no' if you feel that the care you are offering them could improve their life. This becomes all the more complicated if there are concerns that factors other than the burdens of a specific treatment are influencing a decision. For

example, if a hemodialysis patient says that he wants to stop receiving dialysis, on the surface this seems simple enough because it is a burdensome treatment. But what if he has just lost his job? His home? His spouse? How should we respond if we are concerned that a mental health crisis might be motivating the decision?

How does your team respond to refusal of care? Is there room for dialogue with your patients? How do you support each other if you are having trouble understanding why the patient is refusing?

Dr. Mary Heilman,  
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## 2023 W.F. Mitchell Bioethics Seminar: Unconscious Bias

This year's seminar brought Sean Polreis, the Teaching and Learning Specialist for Faculty Development in the College of Medicine, to St. Paul's Hospital to deliver two sessions:

**Self-improvement Through Awareness:** An introduction to unconscious bias, designed to develop an understanding of what unconscious bias is, as well as to raise our awareness to become more comfortable in considering our own personal biases.

**Implications for Healthcare Delivery:** This session looked at a variety of ways in which unconscious bias can influence patient care. This included a discussion regarding strategies to help mitigate some of the negative impacts of unconscious bias.

**Both session now available online!**

<https://www.stpaulshospital.org/news/wf-mitchell-2023>