



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

## **What Crisis?**

**by Scott McPherson**

According to the *Washington Post*, there's a new crisis brewing in American health care. Not one related to rising costs, substandard service, rationing of services, or any other problem stemming from government's micro-management of the health-care field, but rather one involving an alleged conflict of consciences.

A story in the July 16 issue of the *Post*, "A Medical Crisis of Conscience," tells the tale of impending doom:

Around the United States, health workers and patients are clashing when providers balk at giving care that they feel violates their beliefs, sparking an intense, complex and often bitter debate over religious freedom vs. patients' rights.

Notice the conspicuous absence of two words from this précis: "individual rights." But we'll get back to that shortly.

What's happening is that some health-care workers don't want to provide certain services that they find morally objectionable; while the patients demanding these services are claiming that others are "imposing" their religious views on them.

For example, "an ambulance driver refused to transport a patient for an abortion"; "fertility specialists rebuffed a gay woman seeking artificial insemination"; and "a pharmacist turned away a rape victim seeking the morning-after pill." The list goes on.

This debate has gotten several state legislatures and even the U.S. Congress contemplating passing laws either to force health-care workers to provide services or, on the other side, to protect workers from being punished for taking a stand. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison must be doing triple back flips in their graves.

There's no crisis here that hasn't been created by government interventionism. So-called patients' rights advocates claim that health-care workers have an ethical obligation to serve their patients. Fine. Children have a similar ethical obligation to look after their parents in old age. No

doubt both make for a better society. But such ethical observations on what makes for a more civil and caring world belong in the realm of discourse — not lawmaking.

Those who feel that their religious liberty is being violated for being asked to perform tasks contrary to their beliefs are likewise missing the mark. When we take a job it's expected that we'll do what we're told, within the limits of our general job description, of course. Discovering afterwards that it requires you to do specific things you don't like doesn't mean you get to run to your lawyer. You should either try to work out the problem with your employer or quit. Freedom sometimes means taking your lumps.

Of course, the root of the problem is a total breakdown in our society of any understanding of the concept of individual rights or the proper role of government in our lives. Were it otherwise, patients and health-care workers alike would stop making spurious arguments about their alleged rights and accept responsibility for their lifestyle choices — whether it's a patient who needs to find a new pharmacist or an ambulance driver who should find a new line of work.

Government has essentially deemed both health care and work to be rights themselves, creating a seemingly irreconcilable conflict between those who proclaim their “right” to not be discriminated against in the workplace and those who demand fulfillment of their “right” to medical services. But no such rights exist. The concept of rights enshrines the freedom of each of us to take those actions necessary to be in control of our own lives, not to control the lives of others — regardless of our needs, desires, or any other higher calling.

We often fall into the trap of categorizing our rights — religious rights, economic rights, civil rights — but there is only one kind of rights: individual rights. The only crisis here is the one created, maintained, and exacerbated by government's manipulation of the medical field and the continuing failure of so many Americans to understand the real meaning of freedom.

*Scott McPherson is a policy advisor at The Future of Freedom Foundation.*

**This article was originally published in September 2006.**