The Pharmacist’s Right to Refuse: A Learning Opportunity

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Over the past few months we have read about the pharmacists defending and declining their right to refuse to fill prescriptions in news stories in the New York Times, Science, and in many of our professional journals and newsletters. While pharmacists have often declined to fill prescriptions that were potentially harmful, unlawful, or therapeutically inappropriate (drug interactions, therapeutic duplication, incorrect dosage, etc) the latest discussion focuses on pharmacists refusing to fill legal prescriptions based on their personal ethical, moral, or religious beliefs. The prescriptions at the center of the issue include oral contraceptives, emergency contraception, and drugs for assisted suicide, among others.

While the “refusal to dispense” issue is of primary relevance to practicing pharmacists, it is an issue that involves the profession from educators to practitioners. It presents an excellent teaching and learning opportunity for faculty members and students. A knowledgeable and thoughtful discussion of this issue requires consideration of a complex mix of topics. There are ethical and moral issues, patients’ rights to consider, professional standards, and legal issues that include federal versus state control of the practice of pharmacy. Many states have passed laws allowing pharmacists to refuse to dispense while the US Congress has introduced multiple pieces of legislation directed at this issue and proposed to impose penalties on pharmacists refusing to promptly fill a prescription. Adding to this are the published statements from leaders of our major professional organizations emphasizing that the issue is more than a personal one as it substantially affects the pharmacy profession as a whole.

The issue of the pharmacist’s right to refuse is multifaceted and not amenable to a simple conclusion that encompasses the major variations of all possible scenarios. In short, it is an excellent issue for faculty members to encourage discussion in and outside of the classroom. This is territory where the law, ethics/morals, and professionalism intersect.

There is a natural tendency to avoid controversial issues in the classroom for fear of offending individuals, and so, direct reference to religion, or sex, or abortion are usually avoided. These issues have a higher risk for the instructor, in dealing with controversial topics, but have the potential for greater reward in terms of student learning and enhancing communication skills. Pharmacy students should be asked to consider variations of controversial issues and apply knowledge and principles from the law, ethics/morals, and professional standards. They should explore the “cut and dry” cases as well as those that reach the boundaries of the law, ethics/morals, and professionalism. A relevant and timely issue that is featured in the mass media provides a unique opportunity to capture the interest of students and to integrate their knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes through oral and written communications.

This “refusal to dispense” issue also demonstrates the need for flexibility and adaptability in the doctor of pharmacy curriculum. The issue should be presented in the context of law, ethics/morals, and professionalism together and not as separate topics. It also raises the question of how we engage students to address a rapidly emerging issue, one that cannot be planned months and years ahead when a course syllabus is constructed. It emphasizes the need to become a lifelong learner. So, as pharmacy faculty members committed to preparing students who are well prepared to meet the current challenges of practice, we should assure that learning opportunities such as the “pharmacist refusal to dispense” are used to full advantage. We should also use the issue as a test case to determine whether our curricula are sufficiently open to incorporation of new and emerging issues.

REFERENCES

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