

Harvey: Religious beliefs aren't a justification for denying emergency contraceptives

Up until the summer of 2006, the state of Washington legally permitted health care providers and facilities to refuse certain services to patients if they had a conscious or religious reason for doing so. However, on June 1, a proposed change to these [Pharmacist Conscience Clauses](#) was accepted, preventing any pharmacy from refusing lawful prescriptions to a patient, a huge gain in the fight to end the involvement of religion in legal and healthcare matters.

Despite the change, one [pharmacy in Olympia](#) refused to comply. As a result, the employees at Ralph's Thriftway were greeted by groups of protestors on their way to work each day and forced to accept the legal consequences shortly after. But this didn't stop them.

In 2007, the Thriftway employees filed a lawsuit in attempt to defend their small family business and overturn the new law. The boycotting diminished and in 2012, they won the trial at U.S. District Court in Tacoma, Wash. Just when they thought the battle was finally over, the state Department of Health and Pharmacy Commission handed them a hefty bill that would make them think twice next time about attempting to step above them. Legal fines exceeding \$2 million, along with the proposal to appeal the decision and essentially shut down their business has finally brought this store owner's streak of luck to a sudden and ugly halt.

The only self defense he provided for the public was that he did not morally agree with his legal obligation to dispense [Plan B](#), an emergency contraceptive. Kevin Stormans, the spokesperson of the family who owns the pharmacy, said he thinks it could prevent a fertilized egg from implanting in a womb, despite FDA officials recently saying that evidence suggests otherwise.

The 2006 law has yet to be changed due to a hold on the trial as potential changes are considered for the Affordable Care Act, according to the city's local newspaper, [The Olympian](#).

The issue here is not the ethics behind the emergency contraceptives that have saved many women from further trauma in cases of sexual assault. The issue is not even the regulation or responsibilities of small businesses. It's reasonable to

allow private business owners to refuse service to a patient based on moral grounds. Otherwise, a tattoo artist might be obliged to tattoo a swastika on someone's back. There's no question there, other than: When is the last time a doctor prescribed a tattoo?

If the law started allowing pharmacies to refuse prescribed medication to patients, rest assured, contraceptives wouldn't be the only drugs refused. What about painkillers, vaccines or psychotic medications? This is only a brief list of pharmaceutical drugs that have been known to stir moral questioning. If a patient is prescribed a medication, they have a right to obtain and take that medication. Often times, it is necessary for their health and safety and sometimes even the health and safety of others around them. The worst-case scenario of this potential change is that drugs would become hard to acquire, which could create threatening situations for patients in need.

This is the issue. In fact, this is the reason why the law was initially changed in the first place. [Plan B](#), for example, needs to be taken within 72 hours to be effective. That is not a lot of time for someone who desperately needs it.

Another issue here is whether or not it is okay for a law to be created or overturned based on religious reasoning. The fact of the matter is that everyone has a right to their own moral beliefs, even business owners. And they have the right to express those beliefs, but not when the product or service they're providing is essential to someone's health – whether it be physical or cognitive.

The fact that the store owner is challenging these rights is a bit ironic. He wants his right to freely impose and act on his religious opinions, but in doing that, he is attempting to take away everyone else's right to act on their own moral beliefs. At the same time, he's threatening their right to easily-accessible healthcare. Allowing him to succeed would mean wasting the efforts that our government has made toward establishing fairness and equality under the law.

If he has such strong moral disagreements with the products and regulations within his professional industry, my question for him would be: Why are you still working in the industry?