

## Case #12: Mixing Politics and Medical Practice

It's no surprise to many who follow the political process that healthcare policy and politics are closely linked. But until lately, most people believed that politics stopped outside the waiting room door. After the recent debate over the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (in some circles referred to as Obamacare), however, at least one physician is using his medical practice to make a political point.

In the wake of the passage of new healthcare legislation, Dr. Jack Cassell, a Florida urologist, put a sign on his door advising supporters of President Obama and his healthcare plan to "go elsewhere"<sup>1</sup> for their healthcare needs.<sup>2</sup> In Dr. Cassell's view, the Affordable Care Act harms his ability to provide the best healthcare services to his patients, potentially putting him in violation of the Hippocratic Oath that physicians take to "do no harm."<sup>3</sup>

Critics charge that Dr. Cassell is violating the Hippocratic Oath himself and acting unethically by making political affiliation a factor in caring for patients. If a person needs urological care and saw the sign on Dr. Cassell's practice, they might end up turning away and not receiving the care that they need. Also, they may worry that if their support for President Obama's healthcare legislation became clear, they might receive a different standard of care from Dr. Cassell.

Dr. Cassell is quick to point out that he is not turning away patients; he is merely exercising his right to express his opinion about President Obama's policies. While his sign advises people to "go elsewhere," it does not say that he will not treat supporters. Such a thing would be unethical according to him. Furthermore, his supporters say that physicians have the right to turn down patients for a number of reasons. Physicians who only take some types of insurance, for example, don't accept patients whose bills are not likely to be paid in a timely fashion. Some physicians' practices also refuse to see Medicare or Medicaid patients, as they deem these insurance plans' reimbursement rates too low to be profitable for the practice. Cassell also reports that he has seen a marked increase in patients since putting up his sign.<sup>4</sup>

Some bioethicists fear the wider impact of physicians who choose to make politics a deciding factor in whether to treat patients. While patients might know that they

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Cassell's actual sign read: "If you voted for Obama, seek urologic care elsewhere. Changes to your health care begin right now, not in four years."

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Hudak, "Doctor tells Obama supporters: Go elsewhere for health care," Orlando Sentinel, [http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2010-04-02/news/os-mount-dora-doctor-tells-patients-go-aw20100401\\_1\\_health-care-doctor-patients](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2010-04-02/news/os-mount-dora-doctor-tells-patients-go-aw20100401_1_health-care-doctor-patients), April 2, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> "Florida Doctor Stands By Anti-'Obamacare' Sign Despite Threat of Complaint," Fox News (The Associated Press contributed to this report), <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2010/04/05/florida-doctor-stands-anti-obamacare-sign-despite-threat-complaint/>, April 5, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> "Front & Center: Dr. Jack Cassell on 'Obamacare' and Rick Scott's reforms," Orlando Sentinel, [http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2011-02-14/news/os-ed-front-center-021411-20110211\\_1\\_jack-cassell-rick-scott-victor-schaffner](http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2011-02-14/news/os-ed-front-center-021411-20110211_1_jack-cassell-rick-scott-victor-schaffner), February 14, 2011.

would not be refused care, overall public health might suffer if people start trying to choose physicians based on their political beliefs as opposed to other factors. Physicians cannot discriminate against patients on the basis of race, gender, or religion. Many believe discriminating on the basis of political affiliation to be equally unjust.

But others argue that while physicians provide an important public service, they are independent businesspeople who ultimately have the freedom to run their businesses as they see fit. Furthermore, some physicians see the new healthcare bill as a significant assault on public health, and if they blindly go along with it they risk being part of a gradual decline in healthcare standards in the United States. Physicians, according to these arguments, have a duty to the health of the public at large in addition to their individual patients.