



AT THE FOREFRONT

UChicago
Medicine

Moral Distress & Abortion Restrictions/Bans

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Disclosure Slide

- No disclosures.

Learning Objectives

1. Define moral distress
2. Describe how moral distress relates to moral dilemmas and moral injury
3. Discuss how abortion bans can lead to moral distress
4. Identify strategies to try to mitigate potentially morally injurious events to buffer against moral injury

Moral Distress – original definition

- When an individual “knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action.”
 - *Andrew Jameton*



Moral Distress – broadened definition

- One or more negative self-directed emotions or attitudes that arise in response to one's perceived involvement in a situation that one perceives to be morally undesirable.
 - *Stephen M. Campbell, Connie M. Ulrich, Christine Grady*



Moral Distress – cause & effect

Potentially morally injurious event (PMIE):
Event that is out of an individual's control
has negative effects on personal integrity

Persistent response to PMIE
1st described in veterans

Moral
Dilemma

Moral
Distress

Moral
Injury

Short-term reaction to PMIE
1st described in nursing

Moral Injury

- Efforts to navigate moral distress → social, psychological, spiritual suffering
- Impact:
 - Feelings of guilt and shame
 - Sense of betrayal
 - Anger
 - Disgust
 - Anxiety
 - Helplessness
 - Isolation
 - Negative thoughts about self, others, world
- Associated with burnout, psychological distress, & decreased well-being



Conscience & Moral Distress

- **Conscience:** “individual’s moral judgement about what is right and wrong and a commitment to act according to core moral values.”
 - *Mara Buchbinder, Dragana Lassiter, Rebecca Mercier, Amy Bryant, Anne Drapkin Lyerly*
- Moral distress long associated with negative claims of conscience (objection/refusal)
 - Also arises from positive claims of conscience (provision)

Moral Distress & Abortion bans

- US Supreme Court *Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organization* June 2022
 - Abortion no longer federally protected
 - Patchwork quilt - abortion banned or permitted

Find a State or Territory

Expanded Access Protected Not Protected Hostile Illegal

AP U.S. WORLD POLITICS VIDEO SPOTLIGHT ENTERTAINMENT SPORTS BUSINESS SCIENCE FACT CHECK

Sept 6, 2023

Mexico decriminalizes abortion, extending Latin American trend of widening access to procedure



Moral Distress & Abortion bans

- US Supreme Court *Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organization* June 2022

Acute change in legal status of care



Potentially morally injurious events



Moral distress



Moral injury

Moral Distress & Abortion bans

- Potentially morally injurious events post-Dobbs:
 - Witnessing patient harm in face of unsafe pregnancy
 - Inability to help patients actualize autonomous choices
 - Inability to train students and residents in full spectrum of reproductive healthcare

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- Potentially morally injurious events post-Dobbs:
 - MFM in Texas reviewing anatomy ultrasound of patient 16 weeks demonstrating fetal anencephaly
 - Laborist in Tennessee diagnosing previable rupture of membranes at 17 weeks



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- Moral distress post-Dobbs:
 - Painful emotions – guilt, shame, anger
 - Painful thoughts – feeling of failure
 - Sensations – nausea, racing heart
 - Urges – withdrawal from others

The New York Times
***As Abortion Laws Drive
Obstetricians From Red States,
Maternity Care Suffers***

Some doctors who handle high-risk pregnancies are fleeing restrictive abortion laws. Idaho has been particularly hard hit.

Desai A, *Obstet Gynecol*, 2023



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- Approaches to attempt to prevent & mitigate moral injury
 1. **Individual:** Counseling, validation, administrative support/resources
 2. **Group:** Team meetings to discuss & process, peer support groups
 3. **Professional:** Advocacy for policy change and legal protections for healthcare professionals, facilitating training opportunities



Desai A, *Obstet Gynecol*, 2023

Rabin S, *Journal of Healthcare Leadership*, 2023

Conclusions

- Abrupt legal changes protecting longstanding medical practice → many prevented from providing care they believe to be medically & morally necessary
- Legal restrictions → potentially morally injurious events, which may → moral distress and injury
- Sequelae of moral injury can include burnout, depression, workforce depletion
- Strategies must be employed to prevent/mitigate moral distress and injury



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Thank You