

The Revised Declaration of Geneva and the Preservation of Conscience

To the Editor: Of late, the bioethics literature has been concerned with serious conversations about a physician's right to conscientious objection. These exchanges are not novel, as there have been arguments against conscience claims for decades, but they appear to be growing and becoming increasingly vocal. This is why it may be surprising to find that the recent revision of the Declaration of Geneva—a prominent physician's oath—retains an element affirming the practice of medicine in accordance with one's conscience.

Originally adopted by the World Medical Association (WMA) in 1947, when the atrocities of World War II and the subsequent Nuremberg trials were still fresh in the minds of many, the declaration is a physician's pledge concerning his or her medical duties.¹ It was fashioned in opposition to the abuses of World War II and as an affirmation of the ethic of medical professionals.² Envisioned as a modernized Hippocratic Oath, it was intended to affirm a physician's commitment to the humanitarian ideals that characterize medicine. Since its adoption, the Declaration of Geneva has undergone three amendments (1968, 1983, and 1994) and two revisions (2005 and 2006).³ In 2016, the WMA decided another revision was due. A draft version was circulated in April 2017 with a public consultation period lasting through May.⁴

The Declaration of Geneva differs significantly from other ethics guidelines of the WMA, such as the well-known Declaration of Helsinki which, in addition to being much longer, provides in-depth guidance on issues

of research conduct. It is obvious that the declarations have different scopes. Some say that the most significant difference between them was the lack of recognition of patient autonomy in the Declaration of Geneva, hence the addition of the clause "I WILL RESPECT the autonomy and dignity of my patient" in the 2017 revision.⁵ While this is significant, it may not be the most notable characteristic of the revision.

The revision process of the Declaration of Geneva took nearly two years and gathered feedback from external ethics experts and national medical associations.⁶ The revisions to the 2017 text are minimal, though the pledge to respect the autonomy and dignity of patients stands out. Perhaps most notable is the line on respecting one's own conscience. While the 2006 statement says, "I WILL PRACTISE my profession with conscience and dignity," the 2017 version was only slightly altered to read, "I WILL PRACTISE my profession with conscience and dignity and in accordance with good medical practice." It is uncertain what the WMA means by "in accordance with good medical practice." Given the current hostility toward conscience rights in medicine, the WMA would do well to explain itself.

It comes as no surprise to those in the field of bioethics that the past few years have seen an increasingly hostile position toward conscience laws and what some call a physician's right to conscientious objection. The hostility is most evident in debates on abortion, euthanasia, and physician-assisted suicide. Prominent thinkers in the field, such as Julian Savulescu and Udo Schuklenk, have argued for removing conscientious objection

clauses in health care for reasons of professionalism, uniformity of service, and the expectation that physicians will provide all services within the scope of their specialty.⁷

John Lee, president of the World Federation of the Catholic Medical Associations, published a letter in February 2018 claiming that the WMA “has plans to introduce two policy measures to facilitate worldwide abortion and euthanasia by curtailing doctors’ conscientious objection.”⁸ According to Lee, the WMA is considering a revision to the Declaration of Oslo on Therapeutic Abortion that would explicitly require a physician to refer a woman for abortion or in some circumstances provide an abortion, even if the physician has conscience objections to the procedure.⁹ Lee also reports that WMA delegations in Canada and the Netherlands have proposed loosening the WMA policy on physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia to affirm that physicians whose consciences permit these procedures are ethically, not just legally, within their bounds to do so.

Several news outlets, including the Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano*, reported Lee’s assertions and the purported WMA changes, which were expected to be discussed at the WMA council meeting in Latvia in April.¹⁰

What is most concerning, aside from the possible stripping of conscientious objection, is that altering WMA documents to require physicians to oppose their consciences would violate the recent revision of the Declaration of Geneva. Hence, with the uncertainty that surrounds this situation and the accusations of a prominent Catholic medical group, the

WMA would do well to respond in a timely manner to the concerns.

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1. “Declaration of Geneva: The ‘Modern Hippocratic Oath,’” World Medical Association (WMA), accessed March 9, 2018, <https://www.wma.net/>.

2. David Albert Jones, “The Hippocratic Oath II: The Declaration of Geneva and Other Modern Adaptations of the Classical Doctor’s Oath,” *Catholic Medical Quarterly* 56.1 (February 2006).

3. “Public Consultation on a Draft Revised Version of the Declaration of Geneva,” WMA, accessed May 1, 2018, <https://www.wma.net/>.

4. Ramin Walter Parsa-Parsi, “The Revised Declaration of Geneva: A Modern-Day Physician’s Pledge,” *JAMA* 318.20 (November 28, 2017): 1971–1972, doi:10.1001/jama.2017.16230; and “Public Consultation,” WMA.

5. WMA Declaration of Geneva, October 2017, <https://www.wma.net/>.

6. Parsa-Parsi, “Revised Declaration of Geneva.”

7. Julian Savulescu and Udo Schuklenk, “Doctors Have No Right to Refuse Medical Assistance in Dying, Abortion or Contraception,” *Bioethics* 31.3 (March 2017): 162–170, doi: 10.1111/bioe.12288.

8. John Lee, letter to World Medical Association, February 9, 2018, World Federation of the Catholic Medical Associations (FIAMC), <http://www.fiamc.org/>.

9. Ibid.

10. Ferdinando Cancelli, “In pericolo l’obiezione di coscienza,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, February 17, 2018, <http://www.osservatoreromano.va/>; and Cindy Wooden, “Head of Catholic Physicians’ Group Warns of Threats to Conscientious Objection,” *National Catholic Reporter*, February 16, 2018, <https://www.ncronline.org/>.