“I’m supposed to be a helper”: Spiritual distress of abortion providers after Dobbs v. Jackson

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INTRODUCTION

The Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization decision has the potential to affect the way that abortion providers practice their specialty by interacting with patients and making meaning from their work.

OBJECTIVES

We sought to demonstrate the spectrum of spirituality of abortion providers and their subsequent spiritual distress in the aftermath of Dobbs.

MATERIALS & METHODS

We interviewed 26 abortion providers from 17 states. Interviews consisted of questions such as "What are the major tenants of your spiritual beliefs (if none, how you make meaning)?” and “Tell me about any spiritual distress or alienation from your religious or spiritual community as a result of the Dobbs decision.”

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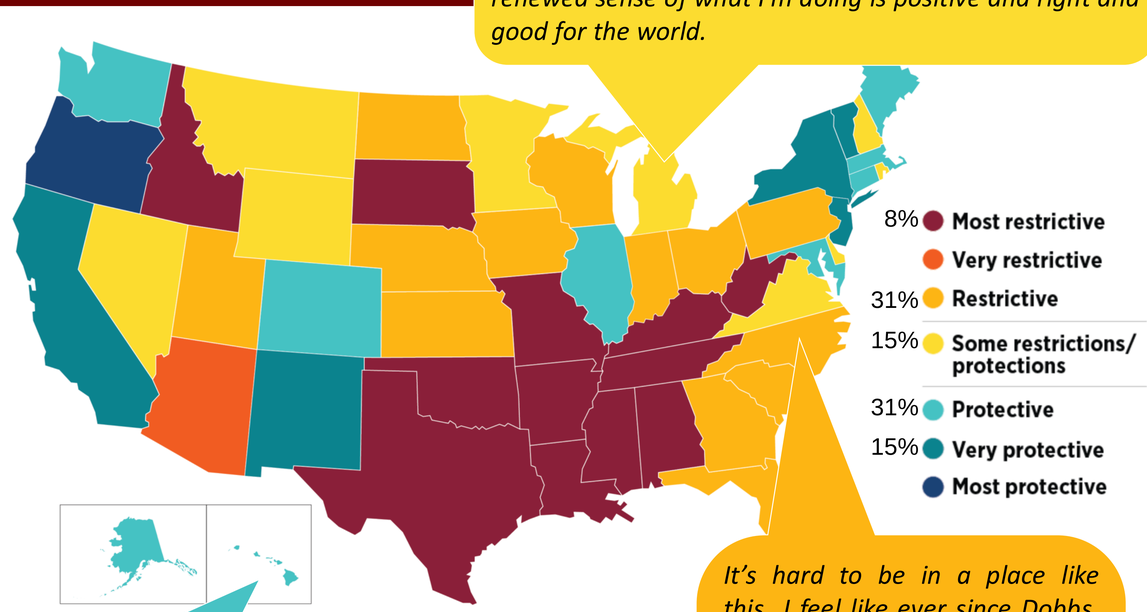
State restrictions on abortions have markedly impacted the spiritual well-being of abortion providers.

I think if I didn’t get to still take care of patients at all, I would have spiritual distress. But because I get to still care for patients, even though in a flawed way, I get a renewed sense of what I’m doing is positive and right and good for the world.



In my moral view, am I doing the right thing? Should I feel guilty? Am I doing the best that I can? Should maybe I should go somewhere where people are more oppressed or having access problems, and I should be out there on the streets, you know, fighting for them where they are, rather than you know, sitting in my cushy place with my very nice rules that I live in.

It’s hard to be in a place like this…I feel like ever since Dobbs, the stigma of abortion has really increased and worsened…facing protesters that are more intense, facing patients that have really horrible situations and stories, and not really being able to help them in a way that I would have before this decision has been challenging.

RESULTS

The majority of participants identified a personal spirituality, while less than half were tied to an organized religion.

- Over half (62%) cited **ethical principles** of justice, non-maleficence, respect for human life, or autonomy as major tenets of their spirituality.
- Many subjects felt a **spiritual call** or **obligation** to provide abortion care
- 46% described abortion as a **spiritual act,** for provider and/or patient

Most participants experienced spiritual distress relating to the Dobbs decision in states across the restrictive-protective spectrum.

Geographical location contributed to spiritual distress in 38% of participants yet was also cited as an alleviating or protective factor against distress in the 26% of participants who did not experience spiritual distress.

Of note, 92% of participants described their spirituality as helpful in coping with the fall of Roe v. Wade.

Sources of strength included:

- Advocacy
- Agency (e.g., “I feel strength knowing that I’m still able to do this job”)
- Legislative work
- Community; **58% specifically cited the abortion provider community**.

CONCLUSIONS

Abortion providers endorsed feelings of spiritual distress related to not being able to comply with their moral and/or spiritual obligation of providing abortions secondary to new restrictions. Location influenced whether providers were experiencing this distress, suggesting that state restrictions on abortions have markedly impacted the spiritual well-being of abortion providers. As many laws pertaining to abortion are influenced by religious beliefs, it is important to recognize that abortion providers themselves are overwhelming spiritual.