



# Conscientious objection in the healing professions: a readers' guide to the ethical and social issues

INDIANA UNIVERSITY  
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

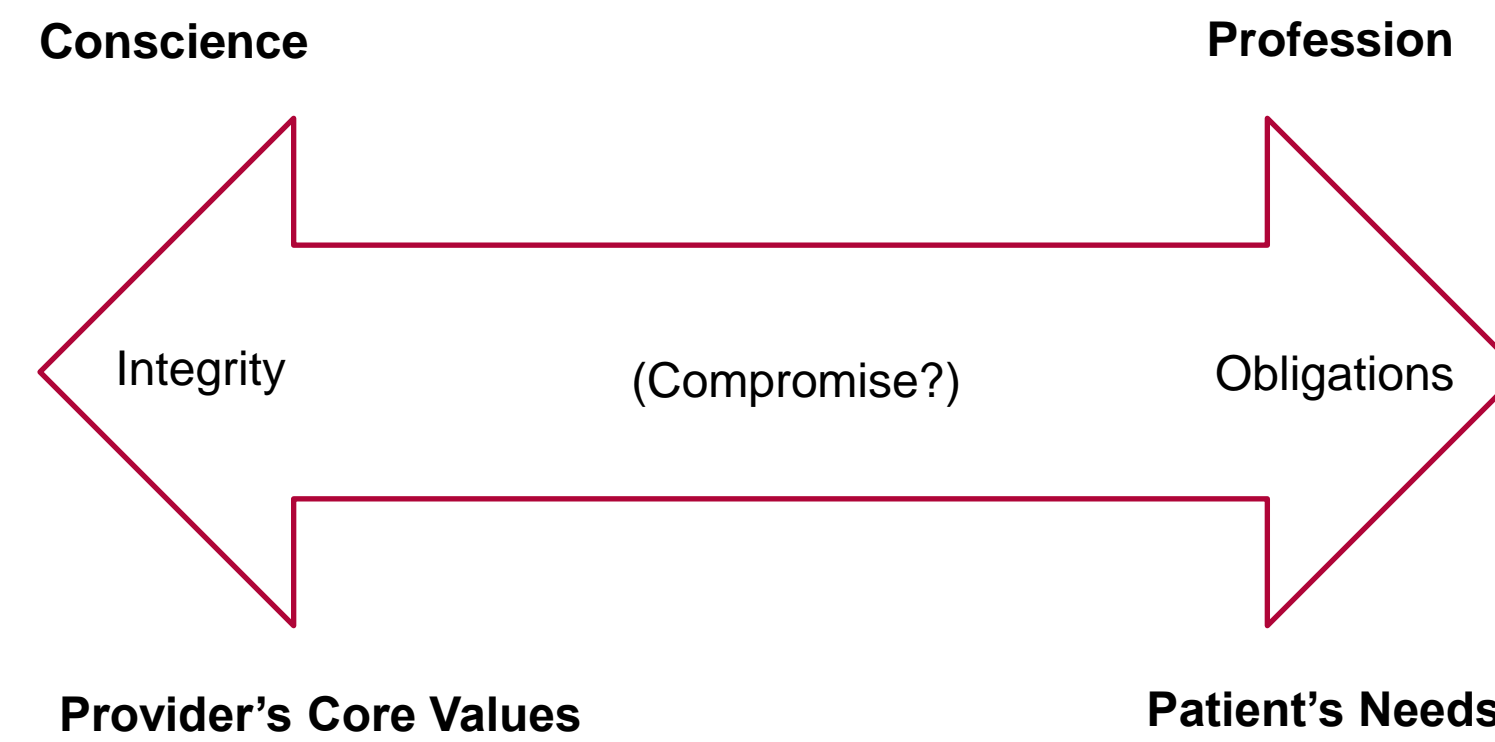
Jere D. Odell, MA, MLS (IU Center for Bioethics & IUPUI University Library); Amber Malcolm, JD, PhD candidate (Richard M. Fairbanks School of Public Health); Avril Rua, LLB, LLM, MA candidate (IU Center for Bioethics); Rahul Abhyankar, MS2 (IU School of Medicine) --  
IUPUI, Indianapolis, Indiana

## ABSTRACT

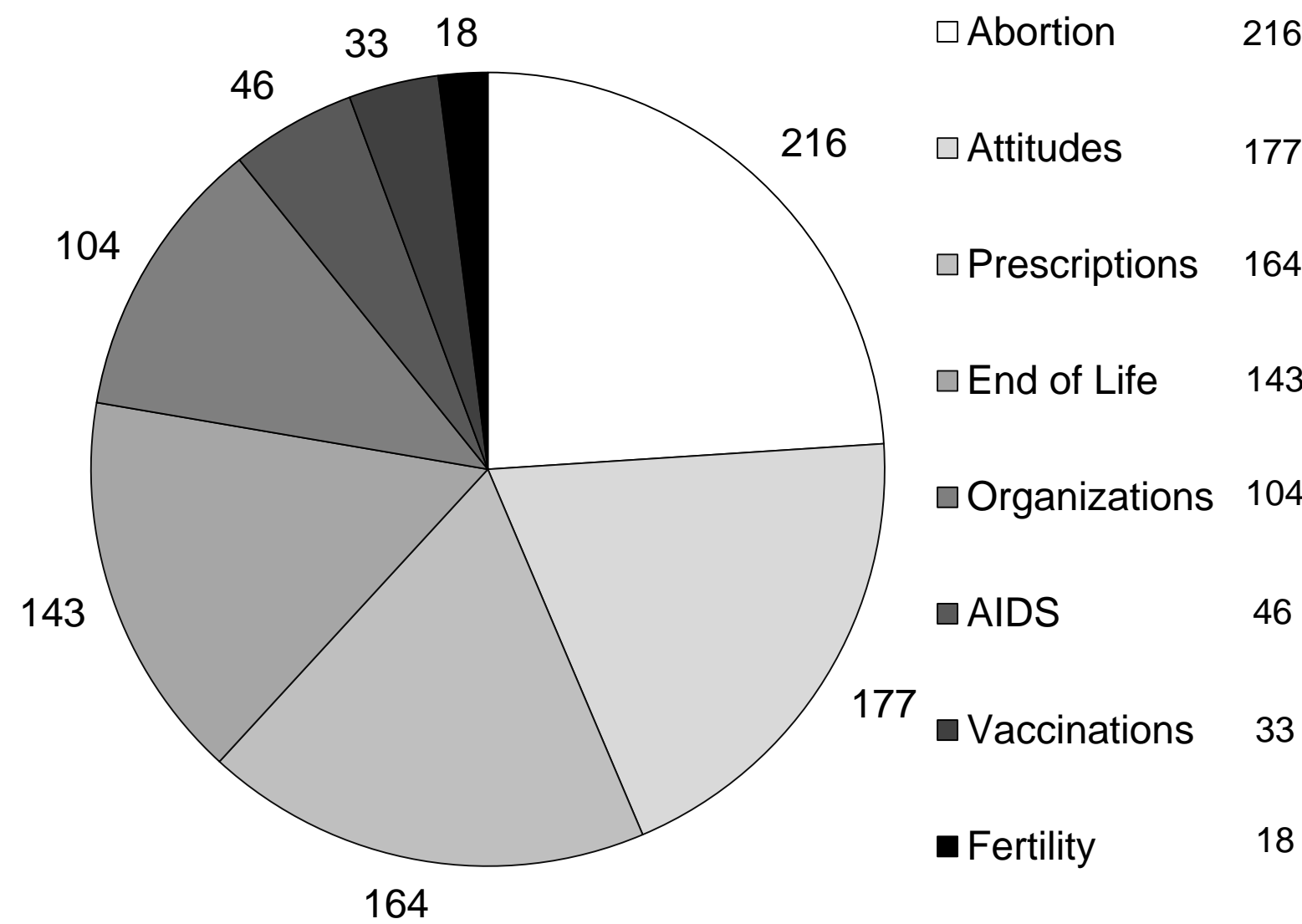
What is a health care provider to do when they find that their moral integrity is at odds with professional expectations? Should a nurse with religious objections to assisted reproduction be asked to stop working in obstetrics and gynecology? Can a pharmacist with moral objections to emergency contraception refer a patient to a colleague without being complicit in a perceived moral wrong doing? Should religious organizations be required to provide or pay for objectionable health services? When is a patient's health and well-being more important than a professional's moral integrity?

Here we:  
(1) describe a collaboration between a medical librarian and the Indiana University (IU) Conscience Project  
(2) outline the subject of conscientious objection in the healing professions, and  
(3) introduce a new readers' guide on the topic.

## SPECTRUM



## TOPICS



## REPRODUCTIVE MEDICINE

### Objections

Refusal to participate in services or preparation of instruments for abortions; refusal to prescribe or fill in prescriptions for contraception, including emergency contraception; refusal to assist persons in same sex relationships with reproductive technologies and fertility treatments; refusal to refer a patient to a willing provider, or provide information relating to available options.

### Selected Readings

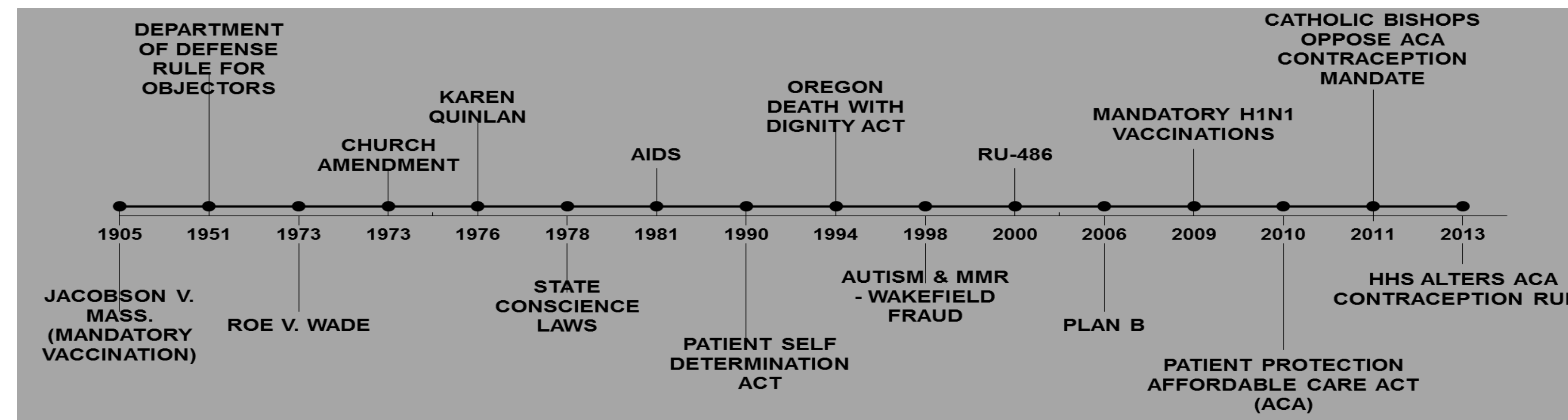
- Chervenak FA, McCullough LB. The ethics of direct and indirect referral for termination of pregnancy. *Am J Obstet Gynecol.* 2008 Sep;199(3):232.e1-3
- Robertson JA. Gay and lesbian access to assisted reproductive technology. *Case Western Reserve Law Review.* 2005;55(2):323-72.
- Wicclair MR. Conscientious refusals by hospitals and emergency contraception. *Camb Q Healthc Ethics.* 2011 Jan;20(1):130-8.

## PROJECT BACKGROUND

In 2001, a group of medical education professionals working on moral development, child psychiatry, and medical ethics established the IU Conscience Project. As part of the project, a website and digital library were created. An outcome of this work includes this guide to conscientious objection in the healing professions. From 2012-2013, with guidance from the IU Conscience Project and funding from the ALA Carnegie Whitney Award, a medical librarian and a team of medical ethics students developed an up-to-date, free guide to the ethical and social issues.

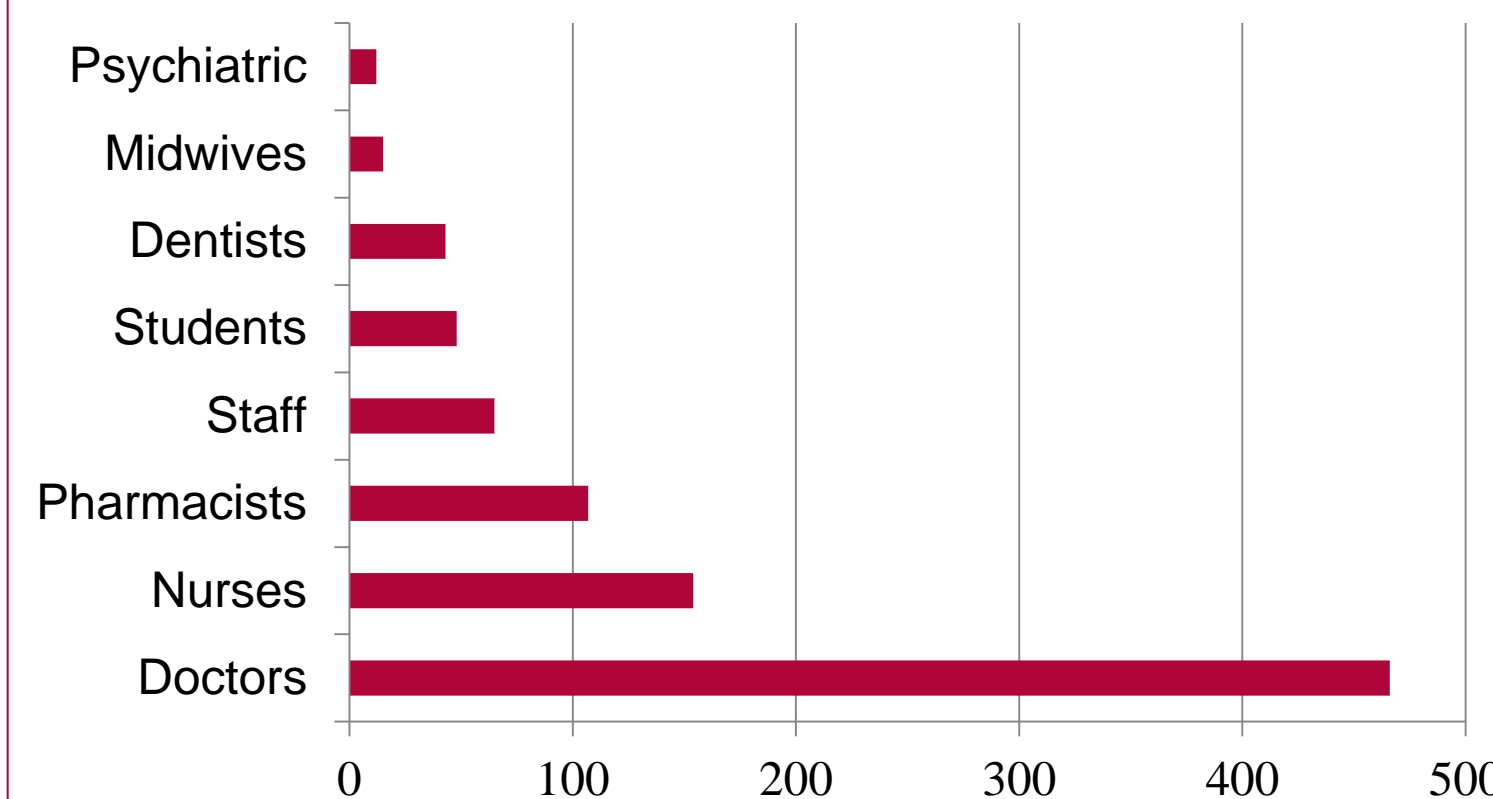
### Deliverables:

- Short Overview
- Selective Bibliography: Guide to the Ethical and Social Issues
- Web-based Subject Guide
- Open Access Digital Library Collection



## PROFESSIONALS

Professionals from all areas of health and healing, including physician assistants, therapists and students, may express concerns about conflicts between values and duties. Commonly addressed professional roles include:



## ATTITUDES

### What do professionals think?

- 86% (981/1122) of physicians favor a duty to provide information about all options (Curlin, et al. 2007)
- 71% (820/1128) of physicians believe objecting professionals have a duty to refer patients to willing providers (Curlin, et al. 2007)
- 57% (84/147) of physicians reported participating in care they found to be morally objectionable (Frank 2011)
- 55% (328/597) of Catholic Hospital Emergency Rooms would "Never provide Emergency Contraception" (Nunn, et al. 2003)
- 23% (170/733) of medical students (London, England) reported they would not perform "Abortion for failed contraception before 24 weeks" (Strickland 2012)

### Selected Readings

- Curlin FA, et al. Religion, conscience, and controversial clinical practices. *N Engl J Med.* 2007 Feb 8;356(6):593-600.
- Frank JE. Conscientious refusal in family medicine residency training. *Fam Med.* 2011 May;43(5):330-3.
- Nunn A, et al. Contraceptive emergency: Catholic hospitals overwhelmingly refuse to provide EC. *Conscience.* 2003 Summer;24(2):38-41.
- Strickland SL. Conscientious objection in medical students: a questionnaire survey. *J Med Ethics.* 2012 Jan;38(1):22-5.

## END OF LIFE

### Objections

Refusal by physicians or nurses to provide care; refusal to withhold or withdraw care; refusal to adhere to advance directive; refusal to comply with patients requests.

### Selected Readings

- Catlin A, et al. Conscientious objection: a potential neonatal nursing response to care orders that cause suffering at the end of life? *Study of a concept. Neonatal Netw.* 2008 Mar-Apr;27(2):101-8.
- Clarfield AM, et al. Ethical issues in end-of-life geriatric care: the approach of three monotheistic religions-Judaism, Catholicism, and Islam. *J Am Geriatr Soc.* 2003 Aug;51(8):1149-54.
- Wernow J, Gastmans C. A review and taxonomy of argument-based ethics literature regarding conscientious objections to end-of-life procedures. *Christian Bioethics.* 2010;16(3): 274-295.

## SCOPE & METHODS

Items selected for this subject guide and collection were limited to those addressing conscience-based refusals by health professionals (physicians, nurses, dentists, assistants, and students).

**Resource types include:** books, articles, reports, U.S. legislation, selected U.S. and state court cases, syllabi and websites.

**Search Tools include:** CINAHL, EthicShare, Google, Google Scholar, Philosopher's Index, PubMed Medline, Web of Science.

**Suggested terms:** conscientious objection, conscientious refusal, conscience clause, conscience laws, conscience-based refusal, refusal to treat, religious-based objection, values-based objection, moral integrity, physician autonomy, freedom of conscience.

1239 Records retrieved (March 13, 2013)

## VACCINATIONS & PANDEMICS

### Objections

Refusal to administer vaccinations; refusal by health professionals to receive vaccinations; refusal to see patients who have not been vaccinated; refusal treat patients during pandemics; refusal to treat HIV-positive patients.

### Selected Readings

- Berlinger N. Conscience clauses, health care providers, and parents. In *From Birth to Death and Bench to Clinic: The Hastings Center Bioethics Briefing Book for Journalists, Policymakers, and Campaigns* [Internet]. Garrison, NY: The Hastings Center; 2008. p. 35-40.
- Salmon DA, Siegel AW. Religious and philosophical exemptions from vaccination requirements and lessons learned from conscientious objectors from conscription. *Public Health Rep.* 2001 Jul-Aug;116(4):289-95.
- Swendiman KS. Mandatory vaccinations: precedent and current laws. *CRS Report for Congress.* Washington D.C., Congressional Research Service; 2011.

## LEARN MORE

<http://bioethics.iu.edu/conscientious-objection>