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The Ethics Dispatch

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"Functioning as our better selves leads to better outcomes for patients and everyone."

-- Tarris (Terry) Rosell, PhD, DMin, HEC-C

Hot Topic

Florida Vaccine Exemption Dispute: Who Bears the Cost? When Children Become Pawns

By [Cassandra Shaffer Johnson, MA](#), Program Director of Ethics Services

There are few issues in American life that have become as politically charged as vaccines, religious freedom, and parental rights. Combine all three and thoughtful conversation becomes exceedingly difficult, to put it mildly.

Unfortunately, the people with the most at stake can also become the easiest to overlook.

To summarize a current controversy, Florida Attorney General James Uthmeier recently warned the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops that Catholic schools could jeopardize their eligibility for state scholarship programs if they refuse to grant religious exemptions from school vaccination requirements. In effect, the message is: play by my beliefs or pay.

According to [Angelus News](#), Uthmeier argues that Florida law requires public and private schools to recognize religious exemptions unless doing so would violate the religious tenets of the school. Catholic schools, in response, have maintained that their policies comply with both Florida law and Church teaching. Catholic teaching permits vaccination, including vaccines with remote historical connections to fetal cell lines.

Decisions Affect All Children

There are legitimate legal, theological, and public health questions buried within this dispute. But there is also a simpler ethical question that risks getting lost: What happens to the children and families caught in the middle?

That question is fundamental to bioethics. Bioethics asks us to examine the moral questions that arise in medicine, health, science, and public policy, particularly when competing values collide and our decisions affect the lives and well-being of others. And few values are more central to contemporary bioethics than respect for autonomy.

Respect for autonomy requires serious consideration of parents' authority to make decisions for their children consistent with their values and religious beliefs. Parents who sincerely object to vaccination deserve to have those concerns treated seriously, even when others disagree with them. **But autonomy exists alongside other ethical obligations.**

Schools are responsible for the welfare of all the children entrusted to them. Vaccination against communicable diseases such as measles, polio, and chickenpox is not solely an individual health decision because infectious diseases, by definition, involve other people. A decision affecting one child may create risks for classmates, teachers, infants, pregnant people, or really any living human on the planet.

School Noncompliance Penalizes Families

To paraphrase one of my favorite aphorisms: **Your right to make a fist and swing ends where my face begins.** But where does the right to “make a fist” end, and who ultimately takes the hit?

Uthmeier has warned that failure to comply could jeopardize Catholic schools' eligibility for state scholarship programs. That is what gives the “play my way or pay” threat real consequences. According to the [Miami Herald](#), more than 95% of students attending Catholic schools in the Archdiocese of Miami receive some form of state scholarship assistance, with many scholarships providing approximately \$6,500 annually toward tuition.

That changes the ethical character of the threat considerably.

As we've seen countless times before and will sadly see countless times in the future, a dispute ostensibly between institutions could ultimately affect thousands of families who had no role in creating it.

A parent relying on scholarship assistance may suddenly face uncertainty about whether they can afford their child's school. A child may face leaving teachers, classmates, and a community they know. Families who vaccinate their children and families who seek religious exemptions could experience consequences from the same political confrontation.

Furthermore, **if vaccination rates decline sufficiently to allow preventable diseases to spread, children and families may face an entirely different consequence: illness that could have been prevented.**

In other words, the people throwing the punches may not be the people taking the hits.

A Matter of Justice

This is where the bioethical principle of justice becomes particularly important.

Justice asks us to consider not merely whether a policy can be defended, but how its benefits and burdens are distributed. Who possesses the power to make the decision? Who receives its benefits? And, importantly, who bears its consequences? Who takes the hit?

The people making this argument are attorneys general, bishops, lawyers, public health officials, and other institutional leaders. The people who will experience its severest consequences are children and families.

That imbalance must matter.

There is another ethical concern here as well: human beings should not be treated merely as instruments for achieving someone else's goal. Children should not become pawns through which adults demonstrate their commitment to parental rights, religious freedom, institutional authority, or whatever "point" adults are trying to impress on others. **Public health should not become collateral damage in a political contest between powerful institutions.**

You may have noticed that none of this resolves the underlying vaccine question. Nor should it. It was never intended to.

I argue that religious conscience matters. Public health matters. Institutional integrity matters. Parental authority matters. Protecting vulnerable children and vulnerable people matters. Bioethics requires us to hold those competing obligations together rather than reducing complicated questions to slogans, political teams, winners, and losers.

I also argue that perhaps we are asking the wrong question when we ask only who has the right to decide. **We should also ask: Who will bear the consequences of that decision? Who takes the hit?**

In Florida, the answer may ultimately be children and families who hold very little power in the arguments taking place around them.

Whatever position we take on vaccines, religious exemptions, or government authority, that should trouble us. Children should never become leverage in battles between powerful adults and institutions. Our ethical obligation is not simply to win the argument. It is to remember who has to live with the outcome.

Sources

[Florida AG warns Catholic schools over vaccine exemptions | Miami Herald](#)

[Moral Guidance on Vaccines | USCCB](#)

[Florida AG presses Catholic schools on vaccine exemptions](#)

[Florida AG warns Catholic schools on vaccine exemptions](#)

Bioethics in the News



[There's a birth control backlash online. Can it explain the rise in abortions?](#)

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[U.S. lawmakers vote to hold Biden's former medical adviser Anthony Fauci in contempt of Congress](#)

Scientific American

[New York's Medical Aid in Dying law takes effect over pushback from Catholic caretakers](#)

Courthouse News Service

Case Study

Kidney Donor Hesitant to Donate

Eric Graystone Asks for Ethics Committee Opinion

Mr. Adam Graystone is a 56-year-old man suffering from end-stage renal disease. He has been on hemodialysis for the past three years, and his condition had remained stable until recently. He is in need of a kidney transplant and has been considered a strong candidate, but he has not yet received a transplant due to genetic factors and difficulty finding a suitable match.

His wife recently traced their family tree and discovered that Mr. Graystone had an estranged brother whom they had recently contacted. Eric Graystone arrived during Mr. Graystone's current hospitalization. During his visit, the family and medical team asked whether he would be willing to potentially serve as a kidney donor for his brother. Because they are genetically related, the likelihood of a successful transplant could be increased, potentially saving Adam's life. Without a transplant, Adam is likely to die within the coming weeks.

Eric was indecisive. He felt that he should donate his kidney, but did not want to because he was concerned about how doing so might affect his own family. He reached out to the hospital ethics committee to discuss the ethical considerations involved in his decision.

Ethical Musings

Sacrifice Within Reason

A Virtuous Approach to Vaccination

By [Ryan Pferdehirt, D.Bioethics, HEC-C](#), Vice President of Ethics Services,
Rosemary Flanigan Chair

The practice of demonstrating love for another person can take many different forms, but one common expression is making a sacrifice for someone else. It does not have to be as radical as sacrificing one's life for another person. Rather, it can involve the ordinary sacrifices we make every day: our time, attention, money, or comfort. The act of giving something of ourselves for the benefit of another is a genuine expression of love and a fundamental teaching of the Catholic Church.

Within Catholicism, love and sacrifice are closely connected. St. Ignatius of Loyola prayed, "Teach me, O Lord, to give and not count the cost." More recently, Teresa Coda wrote, "Sacrifice is an essential characteristic in the enterprise of family life, just as it's necessary in the personal pursuit of compassion, openness to the movement of the Spirit, and union with our neighbors and our God." ([U.S. Catholic](#))

Sacrificing for Our Neighbors

Following this reasoning, the teaching to "love thy neighbor as thyself" might also be understood as a call to sacrifice for our neighbors as we would hope they would sacrifice for us. While the idea of sacrificing for others may initially sound extreme, it is actually as common and practical as everyday life. Imagine you are going out of town for a few weeks. It would not be unusual for a good neighbor to keep an eye on your home while you are away or hold onto packages that are delivered. If you are running late getting home from work, perhaps a neighbor watches your children until you arrive.

We do not often call these acts love. We simply call that person a good neighbor. Yet each of these actions requires some degree of sacrifice. Not everyone is fortunate enough to have a neighbor willing to make those sacrifices, but most of us wish we did. Most of us long to be part of a community in which people look out for one another.

Ethically Meaningful Sacrifice

This perspective of loving, and therefore sometimes sacrificing for, another person becomes more complicated when considering vaccination and vaccine hesitancy. The Catholic Church, as well as the National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC), has maintained that the magisterium "has never condemned the theory or practice of immunization" and "often has promoted both over the last 200 years." Some Catholic commentators, such as Brehany, contend that Catholics could take a "virtuous" approach to questions about vaccination. A patient might make "a decision that best promotes health, first and foremost of oneself or one's dependents and then of the community." ([Catholic World Report](#))

The virtue of generosity, important to both Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, calls upon a person to give to others. Aristotle, however, argues that virtue exists as a mean between two vices. Generosity therefore does not require limitless self-sacrifice. One should give to others while also giving reasonable consideration to oneself. This offers a useful framework for thinking about a virtuous approach to vaccination.

From this perspective, an individual might ask not only, "What do I want?" or even "What is best for me?" but also, "What am I willing to give for the good of my neighbor?" Participating in vaccination may be one way of accepting a personal burden for both individual and communal benefit. For someone who has a strong personal objection to vaccination, that sacrifice may feel more significant. **Yet it is precisely when sacrifice carries a cost that the concepts of generosity and love become ethically meaningful.**

Living in Community: What We Owe

This does not mean that every sacrifice is required or that individual concerns should simply be dismissed. Sacrifice, as the *U.S. Catholic* article itself emphasizes, must remain "within reason." But a moral framework centered entirely on what an individual is entitled to avoid risks losing something important. If loving our neighbor sometimes means accepting inconvenience, discomfort, or even a limited personal burden for another person's benefit, then

vaccination cannot be considered solely as a question of individual preference. It also raises a question of what we owe one another.

As the Jesuit tradition holds, we are called to be “people for others.” Perhaps one expression of that calling is recognizing that living in community sometimes requires us to give something of ourselves, not because it benefits us directly, but because it may protect the person standing next to us.

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