Conscientious objection is an unethical refusal to treat

Objective: Conscientious objection (CO) is a healthcare professional's refusal to provide a legal medical service to a patient for personal or religious reasons. In much of the world, CO is unregulated. The impact of CO on women's health and their human rights has largely been neglected in the literature.

Materials: Published literature and statements of various institutions.

Methods: This review analyses the historical development of CO, its moral stance on killing in war versus the practice of CO in medicine, and whether CO in medicine is inappropriate.

Results: CO is mainly exercised in reproductive health for abortion and contraception. Most professionals who cite CO are opposed to women's reproductive self-determination because they personally disagree with women's decisions to prevent or terminate an unwanted pregnancy. However, the refusal to treat is a serious breach of healthcare professionals' duty to help patients. It occurs at two levels: individual (personal decisions of doctors and other workers) and institutional (actions or inactions of health systems and hospitals). Those who practice CO are using their position of trust and authority to impose their personal beliefs on patients, who depend on them for essential healthcare. Hospitals that prevent staff from providing medical services are being discriminatory to a vulnerable population.

Refusal to provide medical services jeopardizes women's health and lives and negatively impacts families and society as a whole. Any attempt to balance the rights of doctors and the needs of patients violates women's rights and dignity.

Conclusions: CO in reproductive healthcare is immoral and unworkable. It is a refusal to treat - or Dishonourable Disobedience to laws and ethical codes. It should be dealt with like any other failure to perform one's professional duty, through enforcement and disciplinary measures.

[1] Gynmed Clinic