

FIGO Human Rights and Women's Health Case 9

Denial of dignity

Doctor D. and Mr. M., the administrator of the hospital where Dr. D. practices, meet to discuss a letter of complaint from a patient who had an abortion in the outpatient surgical clinic 3 months previously. The letter states that the patient was forced to undergo a painful vacuum aspiration of a 10-week pregnancy without anesthesia and that Dr. D. ignored her screams of pain and requests for pain relief.

Dr. D. suspects that Mr. M. shares her belief that far too many women are having abortions. She assumes that he will support her opinion that providing pain relief only encourages these women to have more abortions. Although Dr. D. professes that she supports legal and safe abortion, she believes that the current laws make it too easy for women to terminate their pregnancies. Dr. D. considers that a little pain during the procedure discourages women from having unprotected sex.

Mr. M. expresses his disbelief that Dr. D. would purposely withhold pain relief for women undergoing operative surgical procedures. Dr. D. replies, "Only those having abortions, Mr. M. You have to be cruel in order to be kind." She continues, "There is only a little cramping if they lie still on the table. But if they move, they pay the price."

Horrified, Mr. M responds, "Do you mean to say that this woman is not the only one? How many times have you performed this procedure without anesthesia? This former patient of yours claims she has recurrent nightmares and is no longer able to function at work as a result of your cruelty and lack of professionalism. How do you expect the hospital to respond to this complaint?"

Questions for discussion

1. What are the medical issues in this case? Specifically:
 - a. What measures can be taken to assess and provide pain relief during outpatient surgical procedures?
 - b. What are the risks and benefits of providing or not providing pain relief for a patient having a vacuum aspiration of the uterus?
2. Using the Integrated Human Rights and Health Checklist, identify the human rights that were infringed in this case.
3. What standards of practice in hospitals and outpatient surgery clinics ensure a patient's right to be free from degrading and inhuman treatment?
4. How should the hospital administrator respond to the patient's letter of complaint?

