

RESPECT FOR AUTONOMY

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Surgeons have a duty of care towards their patients that goes beyond merely protecting life and health. Their additional duty of care is to respect the autonomy of their patients and their ability to make choices about their treatments, and to evaluate potential outcomes in light of other life plans. Such respect is particularly important for surgeons because, without it, the trust between them and their patients may be compromised, along with the success of the surgical care provided. We are careful enough in everyday life about whom we allow to touch us and to see us unclothed. It is hardly surprising that many people feel strongly about exercising the same control over a potentially hazardous activity, such as surgery. For all these reasons, there is a wide moral and legal consensus that patients have the right to exercise choice over their surgical care. In this context, a right should be interpreted as a claim that can be made on the surgeon. The surgeon, therefore, accepts the strict duty to respect the patient's choice, regardless of personal preferences. Thus, to the degree that patients have a right to make choices about proposed surgical treatment, it then follows that they should be allowed to refuse treatments that they do not want, even when surgeons think that they are wrong. The right to make an unwise decision was exemplified in a case where a woman with capacity refused renal replacement therapy. The court reminded doctors that, notwithstanding the fact that other citizens might consider her decision unreasonable, illogical or even immoral, none of these criticisms of the decision by themselves provide evidence of a lack of capacity. Patients can refuse surgical treatment that will save their lives, either at present or in the future. The latter, through the formulation of advance decisions or lasting powers of attorney, specify the types of life-saving treatments they may later become incompetent to refuse them. RESPECT FOR AUTONOMY

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