August 4 2014

Freedom of Professional Judgment

I would like to thank the CPSO for inviting comment about its Policy Statement #5-08, “Physicians and the Ontario Human Rights Code.”

The CPSO policy is fair and should not change.

Some, and I would hope most, Canadian physicians wish to practice as professionals in a free country, and to use their hard-won medical wisdom in the service only of the patient who presents with the unique circumstances of an individual life. This excludes treating the patient as a means to an end, political or otherwise, but rather the doctor’s judgment should be fearlessly focused on the physical and mental integrity of the patient.

In recent years various activists have attempted to impugn certain medical decisions in controversial situations, notably requests for abortion or for potentially abortifacient drugs. The activists wish to portray their ideological opponents as driven by purely private (usually religious) prejudices which have no place in medical practice. The CPSO should decline to be used by such activists as an instrument to suppress their critics, for in reality that is all that is going on with demands that physicians be forced to refer for, or perform, certain acts.

If a physician has come to the conclusion that induced abortion would be bad for a certain patient and fatal for her child, the CPSO is in a good position to recognize this opinion as resulting from the healthy application of medical judgment. Some activists wish to malign such decisions by casting them as creatures of a whimsical “conscience” as opposed to an obedience to “professionalism.”

These activists have a debased understanding of both concepts. The free application of a good conscience directs the doctor to offer selfless professional judgment to each human being he or she has the honour to advise and treat.

The concept of “conscience” should never be used to cloak an agenda hidden from the patient, and the concept of “professionalism” should never be turned on its head to subjugate professional judgment to a political ideology or to persecute those who show ethical courage.

I wish the CPSO endurance in resisting the erosion of its members’ freedom to do the right thing for their patients.