

Editorial

The patient's right to life — a student's right to live

Should a dental student who tests positive for the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) be allowed to continue treating patients? An unseemly court battle is brewing over a case in which an HIV-positive student has been denied access to patients and in essence denied the ability to complete his dental education.

Some years ago, when the transmission mechanism of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) was not fully understood, the fear of the disease was shrouded in hysteria. Those who tested positive for the HIV virus were treated like lepers, and even children were mercilessly taunted and forced out of their schools.

Now, however, it is understood that only direct contact between the blood of infected and the blood of uninfected individuals can transmit the disease. Such contact, of course, is possible in dental treatment. Thus, concern for the patient who may be treated by an HIV-positive dentist is paramount.

However, the issue of whether a known HIV-positive dentist, or dental student, should be allowed to treat patients is not as simple as it may first appear. Is not concern for the rights of the AIDS-infected individual, and the right of that person to live out his or her limited life in as normal a fashion as possible, equally important as concern for the patient?

Is not the choice of whether or not to be treated by an AIDS-infected dentist the choice of the patient, not of the government or of the university? Are there not patients, themselves perhaps AIDS carriers, who would be very comfortable being treated by a similarly infected dentist or dental student?

In the United States, the law is clear. An individual who harbors the AIDS virus is accorded the same rights due to all citizens and is protected against discrimination by the same laws that protect the handicapped against discrimination.

So what does a university do with a dental student who has been infected? The patient's right to life comes head to head with the student's right to a normal life — a "normal" life for as long as that may be.

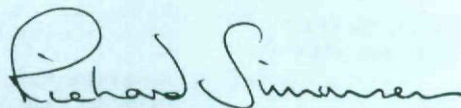
Let the student stay in school and finish his or her education. All patients who may come in contact with the student must be informed of the student's medical condition. In general, a person's medical record is a private matter. In such cases, however, the individual's (student's) right to privacy of his or her medical condition must be subordinate to the patients' right to be aware of the possibility, however remote, of contracting a fatal disease from dental treatment. The patients must be allowed to choose whether or not they wish to be treated by an HIV-positive student. At the same time, the university must not summarily deny an individual the right to complete his or her education.

The road to the understanding of AIDS has been a rocky one. Who cannot have been touched by the recent death of Ryan White? His life gives us all pause to consider our own views on AIDS and its victims. Here was a hemophiliac boy, a teenager who, after contracting AIDS from a blood transfusion, was driven from his school in Kokomo, Indiana. When asked if he harbored any bitterness against the people responsible, Ryan replied with magnanimity beyond his years, "Not really — they were just trying to protect their kids."

Those words, and Ryan's face, will remain with me always. In these times of cheap heroes, he was a true hero. Cannot we all be so gracious, so forgiving, so tolerant toward alternative points of view as Ryan White was?

The victims of AIDS have our compassion. More than that they need our understanding, and they deserve our help in living out their lives in as natural and comfortable a way as possible.

Their human rights are, as are the rights of all of us, non-negotiable.



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