Opinion

Physicians' role in the debate on polarizing medical topics

LUIGI ADAMO^{1,2}

¹Barnes-Jewish Hospital, St. Louis, MO, USA

²Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis, MO, USA

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The debate over the rights of the unborn has been part of the medical community since the beginning of the medical profession (Markel 2004). With the evolution of customs, morals, and culture, the debate has taken different colors, and different positions have gained variable degrees of popularity among physicians. The last months have arguably marked a worrisome shift in the debate on these topics within the medical community. Pre-eminent physicians and medical journals have taken radical stands and cut out any opportunity for rational dialog. I believe that this is harming not only the medical profession but society as a whole, and there is an urgent need to re-create a space for scientific, moderate, open-ended debate on these topics within the medical and scientific communities.

In July 2015, the release of undercover videos collected in a few Planned Parenthood Clinics around the US precipitated an abrupt spike in the intensity of the ongoing social debate over abortion and triggered intense confrontations that are, in part, still ongoing. The medical community joined the discussion early on, and in September 2015 the *New England*

Journal of Medicine published an editorial and a perspective article to take a stand in the debate (Charo 2015; Topulos, Greene, and Drazen 2015). Unfortunately, both pieces used extremely strong language, offered no alternative points of view, and were based on scanty scientific evidence. The perspective article titled “Fetal tissue fallout” presented an elegant reasoning from a distinguished scholar (Charo 2015). The reasoning was structured to support the opening statement that “we have a duty to use fetal tissue for research and therapy.” Regrettably, a key passage of this article, highlighting the great accomplishments of fetal cell-based research, was supported simply by a link to a web page that focused on a project started several years ago and that had no published results. *The New England Journal of Medicine* paired the perspective article to an editorial signed by three distinguished physicians that offered unconditional support to Planned Parenthood. With investigations still ongoing, the authors stated that the organization was following “all applicable laws and ethical guidelines” (Topulos, Greene, and Drazen 2015). Most investigations ended up agreeing

with the authors, but some did not (Beren-son and Rhodan 2015). The authors did not leave much room to other points of view and used expressions such as “radical anti-choice group” that “continues to twist the facts to achieve its ends” (Topulos, Greene, and Drazen 2015).

I was surprised by the tone and structure of *The New England Journal of Medicine* articles, and I sent a letter to express my concerns. The letter was rejected stating that “the space available for correspondence is very limited,” and *The New England Journal of Medicine* published no other letters related to these pieces. I therefore teamed up with a group of over twenty doctors from around the country and submitted to a different major medical journal a letter titled “The medical community should accept only the highest scientific and ethical standards when debating delicate topics.” The letter was rejected stating as a major determinant that “it is not appropriate to bring another indexed biomedical journal into the controversy created by *The New England Journal of Medicine*.” This response worried me at least as much as the articles from *The New England Journal of Medicine*. Where is the controversy? Why would it be controversial to state that radical positions, aggressive tones, and the promotion of unilateral views are not the typical means of scientific inquiry or constructive discussion? Why would it be controversial to state that physicians should not be taking extreme stands as they are unlikely to benefit the medical community in its delicate service to patients with different cultural and ethical backgrounds? I did not try to speak up for or against fetal tissue research. I would have likely written a letter to *The New England Journal of Medicine* if they had used similar rhetoric regarding a completely different topic. I was alarmed by the fact that the very basic boundaries of a

productive scientific debate were being put into question. Science thrives on productive debate and respectful confrontation. What would happen to modern medicine if medical journals started valuing their political agendas more than science and avoided debates?

On December 10, 2015, *Nature* published an editorial titled “Fetal tissue research under threat” and called for a “de-escalation of the rhetoric and the creation of a space for calm and rational discourse” (*Nature* 2015). This is definitely a most welcome appeal. However, the authors went on to present a one-sided view and imply that all scientists who care about human suffering support fetal tissue research, rather than calling the profession back to the highest standards of objectivity and scientific etiquette in order to be able to re-create a space where scientific debate on sensitive topics like these can occur.

Topics such as the use of embryos and related tissues for research purposes have given pause to Nobel laureates (Nair 2012) and health professionals around the world (Morrell and Chavkin 2015), and they will continue to challenge the conscience of our society for the foreseeable future. We cannot afford to let physicians hide behind ideology, lobbies, or anything else. In a time in which extremism is causing so much grief to our culture, physicians must resist the temptation to abandon discussion. Physicians must offer our society all of the power of scientific debate. Differences of opinion will remain, but honest, transparent, evidence-based inquiry is a key tool that physicians should use to light our way and continue to heal our broken world.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Luigi Adamo, M.D., Ph.D., is a physician scientist who received his M.D. from the University of Palermo in Italy and his Ph. D. from Harvard University in Cambridge, MA, USA. He is currently completing a fellowship in Advanced Heart Failure and Cardiac Transplant at Barnes Jewish Hospital and Washington University in St. Louis, MO. He may be contacted at ladamo@wustl.edu.