

Daryl Pullman, PhD
Professor of Medical Ethics
Faculty of Medicine
Memorial University
St. John's, NL
Canada
A1B 3V6
dpullman@mun.ca

Abstract:

Title: So what's so bad about medical paternalism?

The principle of respect for patient autonomy has achieved an almost hallowed status in contemporary health care ethics. At the same time, the idea of medical paternalism is often presented as the scourge of medical ethics. But the unexamined assumption behind the principle of autonomy is that patients have autonomy that should be respected. Is this true? This paper discusses the nature of patient autonomy, the manner in which patients can be thought to be autonomous (in the Kantian sense), and the severe limitations of the principle of autonomy in the practical sense. The "rule of justified paternalism" is introduced which states: "the amount of paternalistic intervention justified or required, is inversely proportional to the amount of autonomy present." It is argued that the ethical goal of medicine is not just to respect autonomy, but rather to restore it. Such restoration often requires that health care professionals act paternalistically because of the compromised autonomy of their patients. Indeed, it is argued that health professionals may at times invoke "respect for patient autonomy" in order to avoid their ethically paternalistic responsibilities.