

Will Unvaccinated People Face Barriers to Medical Care?



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With COVID-19 cases overwhelming hospitals and clinics across the country, many healthcare professionals are experiencing “compassion fatigue” when providing care for unvaccinated patients. Morsa Images / Getty Images

- **An increasing number of unvaccinated people are being hospitalized or dying from COVID-19 in the United States.**
- **This has sparked discussions about whether doctors have the right to refuse care for patients who choose to remain unvaccinated.**
- **Although some healthcare professionals can choose which patients they will see, denying treatment to certain groups is seen as unethical.**
- **Doctors also have a duty not to discriminate based on race, gender, or religious beliefs, among others.**

Now that vaccines are widely available and accessible in the United States, many healthcare professionals are experiencing [compassion fatigue](#) when patients who knowingly choose to remain unvaccinated wind up hospitalized with life threatening COVID-19 complications that could have been prevented with vaccination.

One [doctor in Alabama](#) said he will no longer treat unvaccinated patients.

“We do not yet have any great treatments for severe disease, but we do have great prevention with vaccines. Unfortunately, many have declined to take the vaccine, and some end up severely ill or dead. I cannot and will not force anyone to take the vaccine, but I also cannot continue to watch my patients suffer and die from an eminently preventable disease,” the doctor wrote in a letter sent to patients.

Although many healthcare professionals across the country are experiencing compassion fatigue, part of the job is meeting patients where they’re at.

Independent physicians can technically choose who they do or don’t treat, but all in healthcare have an ethical and moral obligation to treat patients regardless of their beliefs and behaviors.

Consequently, most health experts don’t expect unvaccinated patients to face barriers to accessing medical care.

Can doctors refuse to treat patients?

Most healthcare professionals agree that it’s unethical to deny patients care, regardless of their beliefs or behaviors.

“Physicians and providers do not randomly decide that they are not going to not treat people who smoke or eat in ways that are unhealthy,” said [Craig Laser](#), PhD, RN, a clinical associate professor at Arizona State University and associate director of the Health Innovation Program.

Some people do not have access to food within a balanced diet. But many with access know these behaviors are unhealthy and do them anyway — and physicians still treat people for the health issues linked to these behaviors.

[Dr. Jeffrey Norris](#), the chief medical officer at Father Joe’s Villages, a large homeless service agency in San Diego, California, said doctors are obliged to meet patients where they are at.

Healthcare professionals do not turn away people with diabetes because they don’t take insulin or decline care because someone has used heroin.

“We do listen to them and try to understand where they are coming from, and what their perspective is. Vaccination is no different,” Norris said.

Norris does not expect unvaccinated people to have trouble accessing care.

“I do not think we will see a large number of healthcare providers decline to provide care to unvaccinated people. I think most healthcare providers will choose to meet patients where they are, even if that means being unvaccinated,” said Norris.

Private providers can decide who they see

Technically, individual providers such as physicians, dentists, and dermatologists can [decide which patients they see](#), according to Laser.

Healthcare professionals cannot discriminate based on a person's race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, or religious beliefs.

Denying care to unvaccinated people could come with repercussions from payers they are contracted with, licensing boards, and their public reputation, Laser added.

Healthcare professionals working on behalf of an organization or healthcare system likely wouldn't be able to exclude patients.

Anyone who goes to the emergency room, regardless of whether they've been vaccinated or not, must be examined under the [Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act \(EMTALA\)](#), which requires anyone coming to the ER to be treated regardless of their insurance status or ability to pay.

Laser believes healthcare professionals have an ethical and moral obligation to treat all patients, regardless of their vaccination status.

"While a [physician] can decide who they do or don't want to provide care for in a variety of situations, I personally believe there is a fine line on this issue," Laser said.

Denying care misses opportunities to vaccinate

By refusing to treat unvaccinated patients, healthcare professionals would miss many opportunities to listen to unvaccinated patients' concerns, educate them, and encourage them to get vaccinated.

Faith Fletcher, PhD, an assistant professor at the Center for Medical Ethics and Health Policy at Baylor College of Medicine, said this is especially important as so many people are victims of misinformation about COVID-19 and vaccines.

Healthcare professionals are vital and reliable sources of facts and information, said Fletcher.

By refusing to treat unvaccinated patients, providers are potentially missing a critical window of opportunity to address vaccine concerns and misinformation through tailored messaging, and to influence behavior change among the unvaccinated.
— Faith Fletcher, PhD

Mistrust in the healthcare system only reduces confidence in the vaccines, she added.

“Healthcare providers have an ethical and professional obligation to demonstrate trustworthiness through their actions, and to build trusting relationships with all patients and communities,” Fletcher said.

The bottom line

Many healthcare providers are experiencing compassion fatigue for unvaccinated patients who get severely ill with COVID-19. So much so that one doctor in Alabama said he will no longer see unvaccinated patients.

Although private physicians can choose which patients they see, health experts do not expect many to deny care to unvaccinated patients.

Doctors have a moral and ethical obligation to treat all patients, regardless of their beliefs or behaviors.