

“An overemphasis on patient autonomy results in patients feeling abandoned and physicians feeling frustrated.”

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Iain McGurgan, 4th Year Medicine, TCD



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“What would you do, doctor?” an 84-year-old lady asks the consultant, for the third time, in the outpatient clinic on a November morning of last year. She is faced with the choice of undergoing surgery for her worsening cataracts, which may also relieve some intraocular pressure to address her early glaucoma, or to proceed with medical management for the glaucoma alone. On receiving an identical measured response she turns to me, the medical student in the corner, as a last resort for decisive intervention. I avoid her gaze, and avoid the mounting conflict: a conflict not between a doctor and a patient, nor between their respective interests, but between two of the great ethical cornerstones of medical practice: autonomy and beneficence. As if to illustrate for the consultant and me the two extremes of moral standing on the much-debated matter of respect for autonomy, the very next patient to enter the consultation room is a 65-year-old man with diabetic retinopathy and an unfortunate host of co-morbidities. He thrusts

his hat on to the table and proclaims, before even a word of greeting, “Let me tell you now, you won’t play God with me!”

The word autonomy derives from the Greek words for self-governance. It encompasses a capacity to decide and act without the constraints of controlling interferences by others or personal limitations, most notably a lack of adequate understanding, which prevent meaningful choice¹. In the steady shift of medical practice from its paternalistic roots to patient-centrality, respect for patient autonomy has come to overshadow its fellow principles of beneficence, non-maleficence and justice. To quote the American bioethicist, Paul Wolpe: “for better or for worse, autonomy has emerged as the most powerful principle in bioethics, the basis of much theory and much regulation, and has become the ‘default’ principle”². But what has triggered the emergence, and arguably the overemphasis, of autonomy as the primary governing principle in



