

Washington, D.C. 20201

May 18, 1982

NOTICE TO HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS**SUBJECT: Discriminating Against the Handicapped
by Withholding Treatment or Nourishment**

There has recently been heightened public concern about the adequacy of medical treatment of newborn infants with birth defects. Reports suggest that operable defects have sometimes not been treated, and instead infants have been allowed to die, because of the existence of a concurrent handicap, such as Down's syndrome.

This notice is intended to remind affected parties of the applicability of section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. 794). Section 504 provides that "No otherwise qualified handicapped individual...shall, solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance...." Implementing regulations issued by the Department of Health and Human Services make clear that this statutory prohibition applies in the provision of health services (45 C.F.R. 84.52) and that conditions such as Down's syndrome are handicaps within the meaning of section 504 (45 C.F.R. 84.3(j)).

Under section 504 it is unlawful for a recipient of Federal financial assistance to withhold from a handicapped infant nutritional sustenance or medical or surgical treatment required to correct a life-threatening condition, if:

- (1) the withholding is based on the fact that the infant is handicapped; and
- (2) the handicap does not render the treatment or nutritional sustenance medically contraindicated.

For example, a recipient may not lawfully decline to treat an operable life-threatening condition in an infant, or refrain from feeding the infant, simply because the infant is believed to be mentally retarded.

We recognize that recipients of Federal financial assistance may not have full control over the treatment of handicapped patients when, for instance, parental consent has been refused. Nevertheless, a recipient may not aid or perpetuate discrimination by significantly assisting the discriminatory actions of another person or organization. 45 C.F.R. 84.4(b)(1)(v). Recipients must accordingly insure that they do not violate section 504 by facilitating discriminatory conduct.

In fulfilling its responsibilities, a Federally assisted health care provider should review its conduct in the following areas to insure that it is not engaging in or facilitating discriminatory practices:

- o Counseling of parents should not discriminate by encouraging parents to make decisions which, if made by the health care provider, would be discriminatory under section 504.
- o Health care providers should not aid a decision by the infant's parents or guardian to withhold treatment or nourishment discriminatorily by allowing the infant to remain in the institution.
- o Health care providers are responsible for the conduct of physicians with respect to cases administered through their facilities.

The failure of a recipient of Federal financial assistance to comply with the requirements of section 504 subjects that recipient to possible termination of Federal assistance. Moreover, section 504 does not limit the continued enforcement of State laws prohibiting the neglect of children, requiring medical treatment, or imposing similar responsibilities.


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