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PHYSICIANS FOR



REPRODUCTIVE  
CHOICE AND HEALTH

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**Headquarters:**

55 West 39th Street  
Suite 1001

New York, NY 10018-3889

Tel: 646-366-1890

Fax: 646-366-1897

**West Coast Office:**

131 Stuart Street  
Suite 300

San Francisco, CA 94105

Tel: 415-947-0680

Fax: 415-947-0683

[www.prch.org](http://www.prch.org)

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## **Policy Statement on Institutional Restrictions on Reproductive Healthcare Based on Religious Belief**

It is the position of Physicians for Reproductive Choice and Health (PRCH) that institutional restrictions on reproductive healthcare based on religious belief—including the banning of provision of or referral for abortion, as well as tubal ligation, sterilization, and contraceptive and safer sex counseling—are harmful to patient safety, physician autonomy, education and medical research. Institutionalizing religious restrictions through legislation, religious-secular hospital mergers or religious health maintenance organizations (HMOs) limit reproductive healthcare and have a significant impact on the health of every community. As advocates for public health, physicians play an essential role in educating the community about the effects of institutional religious restrictions and providing support against restrictions that threaten to curtail or eliminate essential services. Physicians have an ethical obligation to advise patients where they can obtain essential services in situations in which a physician, institution or pharmacy withholds those services.

Institutional restrictions on reproductive healthcare, ostensibly under the guise of religious freedom, contribute to a loss and marginalization of women's healthcare services. A patient's right to adequate healthcare overrides the objections of an individual provider. If a healthcare provider refuses to provide a service in a non-emergency situation, that provider is ethically compelled to refer the patient to someone who will ensure that the patient can and does receive that care in a timely and accessible manner in keeping with good medical practice guidelines.

Furthermore, blanket institutional restrictions — whether promulgated by hospitals, healthcare systems, pharmacies, legislation or other sources — influence healthcare delivery, making legal and safe services unavailable or, for all practical purposes, inaccessible to patients. These attempts to manipulate healthcare service are unethical and dangerous. Physicians for Reproductive Choice and Health strongly opposes institutional restrictions based on religious belief that adversely affect access to comprehensive reproductive healthcare.