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Be careful about forcing medical care on unwilling believers

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By Andrea Jansen

I was raised in the Christian Science religion. Often confused with the Church of Scientology, any off-the-cuff comparison would be right up there with other oxymorons, no offense meant to John Travolta or Tom Cruise.

Simply speaking, Christian Scientists believe in faith and prayer to heal their ailments. So how do I feel, as a 55-year old woman, about not having had medical treatment as a child? It was a blessing and a curse.

My loving, conscientious parents were each raised in different faiths and both had medical treatment as children, but some of it was truly barbaric and they became Christian Scientists when I was 2. Being new to the religion, they did their best to follow the tenets to the letter.

My earliest medical recollection is tap dancing as a toddler and getting a headache. The teacher gave me an aspirin, which I held against my forehead. Mom was so proud.

In elementary school I received certain vaccinations required by law (I have that cool badge of honor on my upper arm), but flu or other optional shots were not permitted. I couldn't go to health class, either, which I desperately wanted to attend with my friends. You can imagine how little this did to bolster my young faith, but I had no choice.

I joke that whenever I had a problem I was handed a Band-Aid and a Bible.

My one major incident as a child involved being bitten in the face by a dog when I got too close to her bone. I don't remember any pain and I didn't react until I saw myself in the mirror. Mom cleaned me up while reciting prayers, and called in a Christian Science nurse, who checked to see if I needed medical attention. No stitches, she said, it'll heal just fine naturally, which it did.

I didn't know until I was 18 that dentists administered Novocain, and I'd had braces as a teen. I learned about this phenomenon when, out of the nest, I went to the dentist. He asked if I wanted a shot. Of what? I proudly returned to work, speaking as much as I could to show off my worthless half-mouth.

Curiosity has given physicians a whack at me, but while I respect them I now choose to avoid them. No particular reason, but lots of other people avoid doctors, too.

Having recently returned to the United States after a 12-year hiatus abroad, I'm surprised at society's level of intolerance in general, surely fear resulting from 9/11. When ridiculed about my beliefs, I'm tempted to make cracks about still seeing my toes and not needing antidepressants, but I rein in my sarcasm and simply joke that I could get hit by a bus tomorrow.

I'm old enough to decide when I want to go to a doctor, a choice based on religious conviction, a high tolerance to pain and being a starving artist without insurance. But forcing groups who don't choose coverage because of faith, not necessarily cost, to accept treatment is getting a bit too close to the precipice. Is there no middle ground?

If they want to prevent tragedies in the future, instead of threatening parents with costly court and prison time, what about funding nonpartisan professionals who could objectively determine whether a condition hinges on neglect and offer options. How about our own Doctors without Borders? Even a small charge would be less than insurance, an emergency room visit or a lawyer.

On the flip side, pastors could easily pick up the ball and counsel their members not to fear contacting one of these individuals, lest they feel condemned by church members. I wish I'd learned a bit more about how things worked, so to speak, without being afraid of angering a parent. Now that choice may include losing the parent? That's a terrible burden for a child to bear.

Legislators don't really want constituents moving out of state or, worse, hiding the evidence. I can see their point about unnecessary deaths, but we need to be careful here, folks. Banning headdresses here, forcing medicine there, lead to what, tattooed numbers on the forearm?

Let's not kid ourselves: Extremism doesn't happen overnight. How about really going back to our forefathers' dreams of freedom, instead of turning it all into a nightmare?

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