A Therapeutic Jurisprudence Deconstruction of Seclusion and Restraint Law: Thinking About Humiliation, Shame and Dignity

Michael L. Perlin, Esq.
Adjunct Professor of Law, Emory University School of Law
Professor Emeritus of Law
Founding Director, International Mental Disability Law Reform Project
Co-founder, Mental Disability Law and Policy Associates
New York Law School
185 West Broadway
New York, NY 10013
michael.perlin@nyls.edu
mlperlin@mdlpa.net

Alison J. Lynch, Esq.
Disability Rights New York
25 Chapel Street, Suite 1005
Brooklyn, NY 11201
ALynch@mdlpa.net

Abstract:

Although a robust and contentious body of caselaw has developed around the area of the right of institutionalized persons to refuse antipsychotic medication, there has been virtually no attention paid to the constitutional dimensions of the potential right to refuse other modalities of treatment -- such as seclusion and restraint -- that are frequently used in public psychiatric hospitals. While there is a substantial body of case law in this latter area, cases are based mostly on standard legal principles that have developed over the centuries: principles involving standards of care, proximate cause, duty, and other factors familiar to anyone who has ever read a survey article about medical malpractice.

Importantly, none of the cases that have been decided have considered the ways that the practices of seclusion and restraint can lead to feelings such as “anger, helplessness, powerlessness, confusion, loneliness, desolation, and humiliation.” Importantly, literature written by patients who have been restrained or secluded do detail the “liberty interferences and negative psychological effects, including embarrassment, humiliation, and dehumanization, that can result from

the use of restraint and seclusion.” Yet this literature has had little impact on judicial decisionmaking.

In this presentation, we will consider how the caselaw that has developed around seclusion and restraint practices ignores this literature (and the experiences of patients), the ways that these practices can shame and humiliate those who are affected, how they rob those subjected to these practices of their right to dignity (in spite of “Patients’ Bills of rights” that are law in almost every state, mandating the right to such dignity), and how these practices further frontally violate the principles of therapeutic jurisprudence, a school of legal thought that acknowledges that the law can have therapeutic or anti-therapeutic consequences.³

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