Equality and disability symposium

Disability matters in medical law

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Abstract

The British Parliament stated that health services would be covered by the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 (the act). However, when people with disabilities are at their most vulnerable, for example when in hospital or subject to medical procedures, the antidiscrimination law fails them. A review of cases indicates that when people with disabilities are subject to medical treatment, the legislative protections are allowed to vanish. Instead, medical decisions are justified on obscure notions such as “best interests”, often with irreversible or even terminal results. This article examines the relevant provisions and limitations of the act, the features of notable non-treatment decisions, and the act’s potential to guide future decision making. It argues that antidiscrimination legislation should be assertively applied to protect vulnerable people.

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Introduction

Generally speaking, it is both immoral and unlawful to discriminate between people on the ground of disability. The gravity and variety of recent cases that involve people who cannot advocate for themselves demands close legal scrutiny. People with disabilities may be medically, socially, and politically vulnerable. Likewise, patients who historically have not been conceptualised as disabled may be protected under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The legislation may offer one legal tool for advocates and scholars who have expressed concern regarding controversial medical decisions involving vulnerable people. For purposes of this article, vulnerable people are defined as those who have conditions that have been relevant to the cited cases such as learning disability, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, microcephalia, and persistent vegetative state. On this basis, the implications of the act will be explored.

What is disability?

The act provides protection for an individual who has a disability (s 1(2)) or has had such a disability (s 2). Four elements must be satisfied for a person to be protected under s.1(1):

a) there must be a physical or mental impairment
b) the impairment must adversely affect the individual’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities
c) the adverse effect must be substantial
d) the adverse effect must be “long term”.

An impairment qualifies if it affects one or more of the following: mobility; manual dexterity; physical coordination; continence; ability to lift, carry or otherwise move everyday objects; speech, hearing or eyesight; memory or ability to concentrate, learn or understand, and perception of the risk of danger. The legislative intent is to afford protection to people with disabilities in the areas of employment, housing, goods, and services. Inclusion of health services was affirmed during parliamentary debates.

Many people who have been the subject of medical law cases should qualify as disabled under the act, which was intended to protect a wide range of people with disabilities, including those with mental impairments. For example, a person in a persistent vegetative state (PVS) has profound mental and physical impairments that effect her ability to conduct ordinary life activities. Likewise, a person with learning disabilities who is incapable of consenting to or refusing medical procedures should qualify for protection on the ground of mental impairment. People with disabilities who cannot participate in medical decisions are particularly at risk in the medical domain and require the greatest advocacy. Accordingly, the act’s potential should be zealously explored for this most vulnerable group.

It is widely accepted that human beings have worth just because they are human beings and not by virtue of their capacities. Bodily integrity, sanctity of life, and freedom from coercion are cherished values that apply to all of us, regardless of the type or degree of disability we might have. One would expect the act to include consideration of these core principles, not least since it provides protection where less fundamental matters, such as employment, are concerned. Nevertheless, a number of controversial medical decisions—including tissue extraction, sterilisation, non-treatment, and psychiatric detention—have been made without reference to the act. However, medical decisions should not be outside the act’s remit; they are deserving of scrutiny precisely because they relate to the most fundamental aspects of existence, including its cessation.
What is discrimination?
The definition of discrimination under the act is problematic because it allows justifications for otherwise discriminatory practices. The act incorporates exceptions into the definition, diluting the protections. It allows direct discrimination, i.e., the treating of a person less favourably on the basis of disability, if it can be legally justified.

Part III of the act provides a two-prong definition of discrimination. A service provider discriminates if he or she treats a disabled person less favourably for a reason related to the person’s disability and which cannot be justified under the act (s20 (1)). Also, a provider discriminates by not providing a disabled person with a reasonable adjustment where required to do so under s 18 and this cannot be justified under the act (s 20(2)). Discrimination is prohibited by:

- refusing service; or
- a) treating a person less favourably in the standard of service, or in the manner in which it is provided; or
- c) providing the service on less favourable terms.

The dangers of this exception are apparent when applied to sterilisation of a woman with a learning disability who lacks the capacity to consent. If the provider fails to make reasonable adjustments under s 21, and the effect makes it impossible or unreasonably difficult for a disabled person to make use of a service, this is also unlawful (s 19(1)(b)).

Five circumstances allow a service provider to justify treatment that would otherwise be discriminatory under s 20(3) and (4); two of the exceptions are particularly relevant for this analysis.

What is the impact of the act’s exceptions?
A service provider does not discriminate if the treatment is necessary in order to not endanger the health or safety of any person (including the disabled person) under s 20 (4)(a). This exception is problematic because it allows less favourable treatment for the benefit of a third party and its impact is apparent through examination of the case of Y, a 25-year-old woman with a learning disability. Y was incapable of consenting to, or refusing, a test and a bone marrow transplant for the benefit of her sister. Clearly, Y received no physical benefit as donor and there was no reported evidence of a close sisterly relationship. The court reasoned, however, that if the ill sister were to die, their sisterly relationship would be particularly relevant for this analysis.

The second exception under s 20 (4)(b) also limits the act’s potency. Treatment that is otherwise discriminatory may be justified if the service provider reasonably believes that the disabled person is incapable “of giving an informed consent and for that reason the treatment is reasonable in that case” (emphasis added). This exception is fatuous because it fails to address the complexity of consent issues relating to treatment of people who lack capacity. This approach conflates the issue of consent and discrimination. One’s ability to consent should not be the cornerstone for determining whether a procedure is discriminatory. The s 20(4)(b) exception can be criticised because it does not assess whether the proposed procedures are unjustifiably invasive and irreversible, have a discriminatory impact, or fail to uphold equal protection principles. Furthermore, the exception distinguishes between people who are capable and incapable of giving consent; the latter are more disabled and arguably should have the greatest protections, precisely on the basis of that vulnerability.

Is disability relevant to non-treatment decisions?
The act is intended to eradicate unlawful discrimination against people with disabilities and yet its influence is conspicuously absent in medical jurisprudence. A survey of significant non-treatment decisions demonstrates that disability is fundamental to such decisions but cases that have been decided postenactment have not cited the act. Apparently the stream of non-treatment decisions have flowed unabated by the act or the human rights legislation. Although the act was drafted as the specific vehicle to protect people with disabilities, even in matters less compelling than end-of-life medical decisions, its protections have not been zealously applied.

The following two cases indicate the emergence of the best interest principle for end-of-life
decisions involving infants with multiple disabilit-
ies. J was a five-month-old who had brain damage,
profound mental and physical disabilities and was
expected to be blind, deaf, and quadriplegic.13
Although J was unlikely to develop “even the most
basic functions”, he was not on the point of death
or in the process of dying. J had required artificial
ventilation and doctors asserted that it would be
inappropriate to administer it in the event of future
collapse. The court weighed the chance of preserv-
ing J’s life, his quality of life, and the poor progno-
sis. The best interest principle was central to the
court’s decision that withholding artificial ventila-
tion would not be unlawful.
This approach was employed in a second case
involving an infant named J.13 The Court of Appeal
considered the withdrawal of artificial ventilation
for a 16-month-old with microcephalia, cerebral
palsy, epilepsy, and blindness. J required nasogas-
tric feeding and was unlikely to achieve a higher
level of functioning. J’s life expectancy was
uncertain but short. The court was unwilling to
require a doctor to treat a patient if, in the clinical
judgment of the doctor, such treatment was not in
the patient’s best interests. To order a doctor to
treat against his or her clinical judgment would be
an abuse of judicial power. This decision was made
over the objection of J’s mother.
These cases demonstrate the courts’ willingness,
for over a decade, to make decisions that shorten
the lives of infants with disabilities, based on
obscure and conflicting notions of best interests.
Surely the mother of J in 1992 believed that she was
acting in her child’s interest when she opposed the
withdrawal decision. The best interests principle
gained prominence in PVS cases, beginning with
Anthony Bland.

Was Tony Bland disabled?
A provocative approach to non-treatment decisions is
to view the patients through the lens of disability.
The following cases involve PVS patients who
would now qualify as disabled under section 1 of
the act on the basis that they have profound mental
and physical impairments which have permanently
adverse effects on the patients’ ability to carry out
any normal activities. The permanent vegetative
state was defined in April 1999 by the Royal
College of Physicians as a state when “the diagno-
sis of irreversibility can be established with a high
degree of legal certainty. It is a diagnosis which is
not absolute but based on probabilities. Needless-
evertheless, it may be reasonably made when a
patient has been in a continuing vegetative state
following head injury for more than twelve months
or following other causes of brain damage for more
than six months”.14
Anthony Bland was in a persistent vegetative
state following the tragedy at the Hillsborough sta-
dium in 1989.13 His brain functions involving com-
unication, consciousness, and voluntary move-
ment were severely impaired. Three years after the
incident, the NHS trust applied for a declaration
that withdrawal of artificial hydration and nutrition
would not be unlawful. Ultimately, the House of
Lords accepted that hydration and nutrition, which
it defined as a form of treatment, could be
withdrawn on the basis of the patient’s best
interests. The House of Lords reported that the
decision was to be restricted to patients in a
persistent vegetative state and not to be a precedent
for decisions to withhold or withdraw treatment for
patients who had a very low or poor quality of life.
A logical concern is whether the Bland case may
lead to the legality of such outcomes for severely
disabled people. “The courts have tried to insist
that they do not wish to extend sanctioning ‘neg-
ative treatment’ in PVS patients to doing so in other
conditions and that they do not engage in
assessment of the quality of patients’ lives. Yet it
would seem that slippage from this moral principle
has already begun.”15
Recently the Family Division reported that the
criteria for the diagnosis of PVS produced by the
Royal College of Physicians were not fulfilled in two
cases.16 Also, by the end of 1998, eighteen PVS
cases had been heard and approved by English
courts.17 The basis of the decisions was the best
interests principle. Surely the act was designed to
establish and protect the interests of people with
disabilities yet it has not featured in these decisions.
Professor Finnis explained that people in a
persistent vegetative state are “gravely damaged yet
their inability to participate in any other basic
human good does not nullify their participation in
the good, the benefit, of human life—not even when
participation is wounded and as deficient as hope-
lessly as Bland”.20 He argued that acknowledging
the humanity of people in a persistent vegetative
state does not require that all patients be given all
treatment. Rather, he asserted that as citizens of an
affluent society, we must strenuously weigh the
provision of basic care to people whose death is not
imminent when this involves no significant burden;
the cessation of care denied “the personhood of
these invalids by breaking off human solidarity with
them at its roots”.21
These concerns are equally relevant for people
with other debilitating conditions who are at risk of
withdrawal of life-sustaining measures. The Bland
holding was relevant to later decisions whether to
initiate therapeutic measures for people with physi-
cal and mental disabilities. R was born with a brain
malformation and cerebral palsy and was described
as being in a low awareness state.22 At 23 years of
age, R was deteriorating physically and neurologi-
cally. A doctor signed a “do not resuscitate order”
which the staff of R’s day centre challenged through
judicial review, asserting it was an irrational and
unlawful decision based on the assessment of R’s
quality of life. The NHS obtained authorisation to
withhold cardiopulmonary resuscitation and anti-
biotics, based on the best interests principle. This
case demonstrates the extension of the principle to
medical conditions beyond the intent reported by
the House of Lords. Further research may demon-
strate procedural decay whereby non-treatment
decisions are justified for an increasing number of
Disability revisited

David was 12 years old and had multiple disabilities, including cerebral palsy and epilepsy. His mother wished him to live out his natural life span.  In October 1998, David was in hospital suffering from infections following a tonsillectomy. Clinical staff believed that David was dying and wished to administer diamorphine to alleviate his distress. Over his mother’s objection, the diamorphine infusion was administered. Violent incidents between David’s family and two doctors led to initiation of civil and criminal proceedings against members of David’s family. This medical decision led to violence and demonstrates the controversy that accompanied conflicting perceptions of a disabled boy’s best interests.

It is unlikely that the medical staff would have contemplated injecting diamorphine into a child without disabilities, and over the parent’s objection. If David had no physical or mental impairment, or it was insubstantial, short term, or didn’t hinder his daily activities, he would not have been placed in this precarious position. In short, if David were a non-disabled boy recovering from a tonsillectomy, the medical staff would not have contemplated these measures.

David’s medical condition cannot be disentangled from his disability; the act was designed to guard the interests of people with disabilities and the medical procedures involved would qualify as health services. Perhaps David could have asserted that he was discriminated against by the medical staff because there was a failure to provide health service under (s 19(1)(a), or that he was treated less favourably in the standard or manner (s 19(1)(c), or terms (s 19(1)(d) on which the health service was provided. Whether the act in fact would provide protection from the administration of diamorphine is questionable, particularly given the absence of the act’s employment in other medical law cases.

Conclusion

One of the distinct dangers of continued reliance on the Bland best interest principle is the unfettered power it has afforded doctors, who are the gatekeepers to all manner of treatment, including life-sustaining treatment. Professor Finnis exhorts us to consider the “true implications of principles and notions being put into practice by a group of citizens whose medical qualifications, experience, and ethos confer no standing to settle for the whole community such issues of meaning, consistency, humanity, and justice”. The antidiscrimination and human rights legislation offered two potential checks on the medical control over vulnerable individuals.

One might conclude that reliance on the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 or the Human Rights Act 1998 in non-treatment decisions is an inadequate, and ultimately futile, endeavour. Arguably, the shared characteristics of the above patients are also shared by a broad population of legally vulnerable and non-disabled fetuses, neonates, minors, and adults thereby justifying an alternative legal
approach. For example, the best interest approach has been avoided through enactment of the Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000 which allows the appointment of proxy decision makers who are authorised to make medical treatment decisions. This approach may be a more meaningful strategy than employing legislation that was not explicitly designed for medical decision making. However, any legislation that governs medical decisions for vulnerable patients should incorporate the laudable intent of the antidiscrimination and human rights legislation and include principles of equality, autonomy, justice, and least restrictive alternatives. What does this state of affairs mean? We are at a juncture where benevolent paternalistic medical decision making intersects with rights-based legislation. Consistently, best interests have been cited as justification for a spectrum of controversial medical decisions. One might legitimately question whether courts have thoroughly assessed alternatives for people who have had their fertility compromised, bodily integrity invaded, liberty restricted, and deaths hastened based on the best interests principle. These controversial procedures are administered to people who qualify as disabled under the act and yet it has not been cited. How are we to negotiate this interface?

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References and notes

5 The Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons was proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 9 December 1975.
8 See reference 2: 35.
10 See reference 7: 280.
11 Re F (Mental Patient: Sterilisation) [1990] 2 AC 1.
12 Re J [1990] 3 All ER 930, CA.
15 Airedale NHS Trust v Bland [1993] AC 789 1 All ER 821.
17 Re H (1997) 38 BMLR 11.
21 See reference 20: 335.
22 Re R [1996] 2 FLR 99, HC.
30 See reference 20: 334.
31 See reference 16: 172.