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## **FAITH UNDER FIRELY** **Doctors rebel at government prayer limits** Bringing issue of faith needs of patients to medical association conference

Posted: June 30, 2009  
9:35 pm Eastern

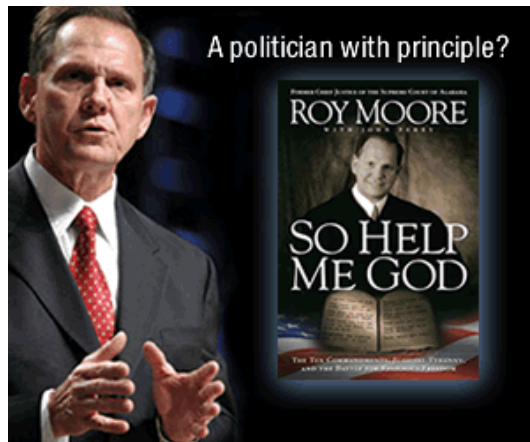
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A government crackdown on doctors and [nurses](#) who offer to pray with patients is drawing a response from physicians at a [meeting](#) this week of the British [Medical Association](#).

"I think it is getting to the point where many of us feel we cannot talk to patients about their spiritual or religious needs or ask them about praying," Dr. Bernadette Birtwhistle, a cancer specialist, told a BBC reporter.

"Christianity is being seen as something that is unhelpful," she said. "... Freedom of speech is being curtailed too much, and I don't think that is always in the benefit of patients."

*(Story continues below)*



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WND has reported previously on the dispute, including earlier this year when a nurse was suspended from her post after praying with a patient.

In that case, documented by the the Christian Legal Centre, nurse Caroline Petrie ultimately was reinstated to her post by the North Somerset Primary Care Trust, which concluded nurses were not required to "set aside their faith" in the workplace.



Caroline Petrie (London Daily Telegraph)

Petrie had been suspended and faced further discipline because her employer claimed she failed to show a "personal and professional commitment to equality and diversity" when she suggested the prayer.

Petrie, 45, a wife and mother of two, is a community nurse who works for North Somerset Primary Care Trust. As part of her job, she visits patients who are sick and elderly. Petrie said she never forced her Christian beliefs on any of her patients but simply asked if an elderly woman would appreciate the blessing.

Then just days ago, a Catholic nurse resigned from her hospital post after being ordered by managers to remove her gold crucifix necklace.

According to reports, Helen Slatter, 43, was ordered into a disciplinary hearing after refusing orders to get rid of the cross. Gloucestershire Royal Hospital determined that the chain and crucifix were a health and safety risk to patients.

Now comes the report of plans by doctors to raise the dispute at the BMA conference. Their argument is that doctors should not be disciplined for raising the issue of faith or prayer as long as they handle it sensitively, according to the BBC.

The physicians said they are fearful because of a Department of Health warning against proselytizing. The government document suggested that could be interpreted as harassment.

The Department of Health deflected a BBC question about the dispute, saying it is a responsibility of chaplains in the National Health Service.

"We are committed to the principle of ensuring that patients and staff in the NHS have access to the spiritual care that they want, whatever faith or belief system they follow," said a spokeswoman for the federal agency.

"Although all staff should be sensitive to religious needs and preferences of patients, the delivery of spiritual care should be provided by the hospital chaplaincy service."

The Christian Legal Centre said earlier when Petrie was reinstated it continued to have concerns, because "the Trust's statement is deliberately vague in places about the conditions that the Trust might seek to impose on Christians in the work place."

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