

POLITICS AND MENTAL HEALTH: THE 'GOLDWATER RULE'

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"Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and remove all doubt."

-Abraham Lincoln, American President

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During Pakistan's most recent political convulsion, someone wrote on the social media website Twitter that, in their opinion, the (ex) Prime Minister was suffering from a psychiatric illness and should be (forcibly) referred for psychiatric treatment. This writer 'tagged' me in their statement, which means it was visible to everyone who follows me on Twitter. Ordinarily, I would have ignored the matter. It so happens though, that just the day before, this subject (attributing mental health symptoms or conditions to public/political figures or to political matters) had surfaced in a discussion I had with some students at a university in Karachi. We had been discussing how important it is for mental health professionals in particular and healthcare workers to not make public pronouncements about specific people (or institutions or political processes) regarding their actual or supposed medical or psychiatric conditions and how doing so can be problematic for many reasons.

The topic in question is an edict called "The Goldwater rule" which was named after the conservative Republican US Senator Barry Goldwater, who ran for US President in 1964¹. During the 1964 US Presidential campaign, a magazine conducted an opinion poll of US psychiatrists about Senator Goldwater. Over 12,000 US psychiatrists were polled, and approximately 1200 wrote to the magazine to express an opinion about why they thought the Senator was unfit to be President of the United States.² Many of the comments were harshly negative, as demonstrated below:

- "I believe Goldwater to be suffering from a chronic psychosis,"
- "A megalomaniacal, grandiose omnipotence appears to pervade Mr. Goldwater's personality, giving further evidence of his denial and lack of recognition of his own feelings of insecurity and ineffectiveness,"
- "From his published statements, I get the impression that Goldwater is basically a paranoid schizophrenic who decompensates from time to time. ... He resembles Mao Tse-tung,"
- "I believe Goldwater has the same pathological makeup as Hitler, Castro, Stalin, and other known schizophrenic leaders."

Senator Goldwater sued the magazine and received damages totaling \$75,000 (\$529,000 or over PKR 111 million in equivalent currency today).

The public furor over the magazine article led to the creation of the 'Goldwater rule' in Section 7 of the first edition of the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) Principles of Medical Ethics in 1973 (still in effect) which states:

"A physician shall recognize a responsibility to participate in activities contributing to the improvement of the community and the betterment of public health."

It further states: "On occasion psychiatrists are asked for an opinion about an individual who is in the light of public attention or who has disclosed information about himself/herself through public media. In such circumstances, a psychiatrist may share with the public his or her expertise about psychiatric issues in general. However, it is unethical for a psychiatrist to offer a professional opinion unless he or she has conducted an examination and has been granted proper authorization for such a statement."³

A version of this Rule has also been adapted into the Code of Ethics of the American Psychological Association, as well as the American Psychoanalytic Association.

This is easily understandable. First of all, unless a physician (including a psychiatrist) has examined and assessed the person in question in detail, no opinion offered can be comprehensive and accurate. If a medical or psychiatric assessment has been carried out, the rules of confidentiality automatically apply and no opinion can be offered for public consumption without the express consent and permission of the person in question⁴. Confidentiality is a basic principle of medical practice and violation of confidentiality can have major consequences for both patients and the doctors treating them including legal ramifications.^{5,6} In a country like Pakistan, where ethics is not part of the formal medical college curriculum in most training institutions, this can be even more problematic leading to poor healthcare outcomes in patient who are apprehensive of seeking medical care for fear of breach of confidentiality.⁷

There is also a larger issue at stake. What is a psychiatrist's (or a physician's) responsibility to society at large? This issue arose more recently during the tenure of immediate past President of USA (2016-2020), because of some of the controversial political decisions taken during his administration, there was heated discussion about the Goldwater rule, and whether it



could be overridden in the interests of public safety or the national interest by declaring that ex - President was mentally unfit to be President.^{8,9} A number of psychiatrists and psychologists in the USA violated the Goldwater rule, declaring that the former President displayed "an assortment of personality problems, including grandiosity, a lack of empathy, and malignant narcissism" and that he had 'a dangerous mental illness'. Some Psychiatrists invoked the landmark "Tarasoff Rule" (duty to warn), when they speculated about this President's mental problems and their potential effects (on the US Government and society).¹⁰

The Goldwater Rule and Pakistan

What happens in the political arena affects all of us in many ways, both large and small: from the price of daily groceries to doctor's bills, from paying for our children's education to trying to save for old age and retirement, everything revolves around politics. We do not have the equivalent of a "Pakistan Psychiatric Society" Code of Ethics yet (the matter is under discussion, and work is set to begin soon on this important project). In the absence of an 'indigenous' Code, we must look to existing international guidelines and rules for guidance. While it is the responsibility of every concerned citizen to take an interest in political matters (whether it is repairing a road in your mohalla (neighbourhood) or voting for the Prime Minister of the country), doctors need to be especially careful in their public pronouncements, especially in media (including all social media, which is just as influential and powerful as the 'old media').

Besides the Goldwater rule prohibitions outlined above, there is also another, simpler reason for staying neutral in heated political matters. Simply put, doctors do not have the luxury of taking sides. Our Hippocratic oath, which all of us take before we begin our professional lives states, in part "(I will) help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrong-doing and harm, especially from abusing the bodies of man or woman, bonded or free. And whatsoever I shall see or hear in the course of my profession, as well as outside my profession in my intercourse with men, if it be what should not be published abroad, I will never divulge, holding such things to be holy secrets."¹¹ We cannot refuse help or treatment to anyone who seeks it, regardless of their religion, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation or political affiliation. We may not like what they believe, what they wear or how they choose to live their life but, as a doctor, we are duty bound to treat them with the same respect, consideration and compassion as those whose views and lifestyles we approve of.

In addition, as members of the 'educated intelligentsia', doctors, like other professionals, are held in very high esteem in all societies, but especially so in a low-and middle-income country like Pakistan. While we must do our best to give a voice to the poor, the disempowered and the oppressed, we should

be careful not to become pawns in periodic, partisan political debates. By taking sides in screaming matches on television or social media, we only debase ourselves and our profession.

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