

Romesh Bhagratee
PHIL 2203
Prof. Whitmoyer
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When is enough enough?

In healthcare, the principle of patient autonomy serves as a foundation, protecting individuals' rights to make decisions about their medical care. However, the idea of autonomy becomes notably intricate when confronted with cases where individuals express a desire to amputate their healthy limbs. This essay dips into the various issues and discussions surrounding patient autonomy in the context of voluntary amputation, when it seems to be a good idea to cut them off, and ethical considerations that arise. Maintaining a balance between respecting individual choices and ensuring the overall well-being of patients raises questions about the limits of autonomy in healthcare or recognizing the ethical implications surrounding these complex issues that are becoming more relevant as time goes on.

As attitudes toward amputations vary widely, it becomes imperative to delve into the motivations that drive some individuals to seek the amputation of their healthy limbs. One example of someone who fits this description is a woman named Viktoria Modesta, labeled as a “bionic artist” by CNN. Ms. Modesta states, “When I underwent a voluntary leg amputation at the age of 20, I was shocked to learn that doctors felt it was more acceptable for me to be in constant pain and for my whole body to suffer than it was to have my damaged leg removed and replaced with an artificial one. That process highlighted an unhealthy obsession with how we value the biological body.” This experience from Viktoria vividly illustrates the mentality of individuals undergoing these unconventional treatments. It underscores the profound impact societal perceptions and norms can have on personal choices, prompting a reevaluation of how

we value the human body. In addition to Viktoria's perspective, other reasons for limb amputation include coping mechanisms, relief from psychological distress, alignment with self-image, and a longing for disability, which echoes Viktoria's motivation to challenge societal expectations. The latter aligns with Viktoria's mission to raise the bar for women and individuals with disabilities, challenging preconceived notions. Furthermore, individuals like Neil Harbisson, who co-created an implanted antenna to perceive colors, and those with cybernetic ears capable of sensing changes in weather, show the potential of merging technology with the human body. These scenarios not only benefit the users but also enhance their lives in ways they deem worth the intricate and unconventional processes involved. As we navigate these voluntary body modifications, the diverse motivations and positive outcomes underscore the need for open dialogue, understanding, and a nuanced approach to the evolution of human technology.

However, with the recent and fast advancements in technology, some individuals are treading on a thin line between being transhuman or perceived as abominations in the eyes of the average person. An article published by CNN titled, "Body modification – or mutilation?" discusses the people who have tipped over the edge and become addicted to their bizarre body modifications. For example, Dr. Anthony Youn states, "In Japan, young people are plumping up their forehead by injecting large amounts of saline, then pressing their thumb into the middle to create an indentation. This leaves a temporary doughnut-like appearance, dubbed the 'Bagel Head.' Extreme body modification procedures are rarely performed by actual physicians. These treatments are more often associated with tattoo parlors than medical offices. I've never heard of a single plastic surgeon who's admitted to performing extreme body modification. And because actual doctors aren't involved, the patients don't benefit from modern anesthetics." This revelation is disconcerting, as the fact that these body modifications are not being performed by

actual doctors and medical professionals raises alarms. For instance, these procedures can be very unsafe; an example is a patient who sought treatment in another country, was denied proper care, and tragically lost his life due to a lack of adequate resources. Regardless of whether a doctor is involved or not, there is always a substantial risk associated with modifying one's body, and a doctor or medical professional can help mitigate that risk. One compelling reason for choosing a medical professional over alternative methods, as pointed out by Youn, is that “there is a big difference between plastic surgery and extreme body modification. Board-certified plastic surgeons are required to undergo at least nine years of schooling and training, pass a slew of rigorous exams, and perform their procedures in a safe, accredited medical center.” This reinforces the claim that consulting these professionals is in your best interest compared to opting for third-party alternatives or different professionals without the necessary equipment and expertise.

These issues can be related to Carl Elliot's article, “Amputees by Choice”, and certain aspect, or manners of thinking can be directly correlated. For example, Elliot describes an issue that individuals are having where they want to amputate specific limbs of their body which is prevalent in these articles because some of these people are addicted to their body modifications. At first, many people were confused as to why people would even consider thinking about removing healthy limbs but some reasons which were seen with Viktoria Modesta and her customizable leg, because she wanted to make themselves feel better or make the people around her more empowered or inspired. However, when most healthcare professionals are confronted by these people and their demands will deny them which was seen in Dr Youn's article where patients were seeking third-party methods for getting their procedures done even if those methods are dangerous. This also connects to Dr. Youn's article, “Dennis Avner, spent years

making himself look like a cat. He went so far as to have whiskers implanted into his cheeks and his teeth filed into fangs. About a year ago, he died of an apparent suicide. Some have speculated that Avner may have suffered from body dysmorphic disorder, a psychiatric condition involving a person's self-image. It has a very high rate of suicidal ideation." This goes heavily into the fact that some people are taking these issues too far. Also, this directly correlates to the discussion of determining patient competency, because sometimes the individuals who perform these procedures are only doing it for the money, and if doctors can get to examine these patients and detect these underlying issues then there would be fewer deaths.

Lastly, I wanted to focus on the future of these modifications while technology advances, and why it is becoming a profitable market. As technology keeps getting better, the future of these changes becomes even more intriguing to individuals who wish to gain an upper hand in fashion, or aesthetics. The idea of modifying our bodies is not just a personal choice anymore, it's also becoming a business opportunity. Companies are realizing that there is a growing market for these modifications because people are interested in enhancing their bodies with the latest technology, whether it's for medical reasons or personal preference. This shift towards a profitable market raises questions, nevertheless. The article, "Are these unnerving body modifications the future of fashion?" by Stacey Lastoe from CNN is a good example of marketability. For example, one cosmetic change is alien-looking horns on the shoulder of a woman, and it's said that "the challenge was to present the modifications in an "inviting, stylish, sexy" way, Huck said. And while the creations were inspired by science fiction (as seen with the alien-like necklace famously donned by Kim Kardashian), the designers also looked to the work of architects and fashion designers, like Alexander McQueen." This leads to the idea of innovation and cosmetics becoming more fashionable and available which will eventually

develop into an industry that's solely based on selling to people who have these issues themselves. The evolving landscape of body modifications showcases not only technological advancements, but also the intersection of fashion, self-expression, and the ever-expanding market catering to diverse individual preferences and desires.

In conclusion, the exploration of patient autonomy in the context of voluntary amputation reveals the ethical complexities and different perspectives. While the principle of autonomy remains a crucial foundation in healthcare, the cases of individuals desiring to amputate their healthy limbs highlight a deeper reflection on the limits of personal choice. As we navigate these issues, it becomes imperative for healthcare professionals, and society at large to engage in open conversations with empathy, understanding, and ethical considerations. Determining a balance between respecting individual choices and the well-being of patients calls for continuous dialogue and an adaptable approach to medical decision-making. As we get more into the future, the importance of adapting healthcare practices to address the unique challenges posed by these complex issues increases year by year.

References

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