

Keeping the Sabbath gets easier for med residents

By Miriam W. Jacobs
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It is permissible to save a life, but not okay to write on paper.

Such are the distinctions that Sabbath-observant Jewish medical residents have to make if they are called upon to work on Shabbat.

"In many, if not most cases, it is permissible for a Shabbat-observant doctor to come in on Shabbat, but it requires a vast knowledge of Halacha to know what is permitted and what is not," said David Hirschorn, now living in Elizabeth and a fourth-year medical student at the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey-New Jersey Medical School, Newark.

Beginning next summer, some observant residents in UMDNJ-affiliated programs will not have to make those distinctions.

In October, Uri Adler approached the school's administration in search of an answer to this dilemma. As a result of this and later conversations in which Hirschorn also participated, the New Jersey Medical School will implement an experimental program come July. If successful, it will be expanded.

The program, according to Dr. Marilyn Miller, director of the medical school's internal medicine training program, will be designed to accommodate the schedule of those who are Shabbat observant and are in their first year of residence, known as the preliminary program. Week after week, these residents now have to

find someone with whom they can trade schedules. The program will "remove the burden of having to go week to week to find someone to switch with," Miller said.

In July, four of the 10 residents participating in the school's preliminary year will be the first to try out the program.

Although hospital staff members may have respect for "our religion," they cannot be expected to be familiar with the intricacies of Shabbat observance, Hirschorn said. It is "very inconvenient for the hospital staff. For example, it may be okay to draw blood, but not to write certain non-essential notes in the chart; it greatly disrupts the normal routine of the hospital."

Hirschorn offered other examples: "Some of the doors are electronically opened, so you have to get people to open doors for you. And if it isn't an emergency, you might have to get someone else to make a phone call for you."

The bottom line, Hirschorn explained, is that if the task is not an essential one, then it is not halachically permissible to do it.

However, Hirschorn pointed out, "In an emergency, if life or limb are at risk, it is not a violation of Shabbat [to perform a certain task] — on the contrary, one is obligated to do what you must to save that person."

Luckily, it seems that "the medical world has seen that medicine and a shomer Shabbat lifestyle can coexist," Hirschorn said.

Whether Adler and Hirschorn will be two of the four when the

residency program starts in July is unknown at the moment. Medical students all across the country go through a matching process, whereby students and schools file requests; in March of every year, matches are made.

"It's no surprise that UMD is offering this program," Hirschorn said, "because as a whole, my educational experience here has been supportive of my religious observance needs. Not just me, but of all three of us."

Asked what medical students before his generation did about this conflict, Hirschorn explained that they had to rely on constant switching. He also observed that things are different now; in Hirschorn's view, the "comfort level" about one's religious observance has increased.

"Medicine is slow to change," Hirschorn said, "There was a very rigid, patriarchal hierarchy in medicine that's the kind of legacy of medicine." Twenty-five to 50 years ago, he continued, observant Jews "didn't dare ask a program director to guarantee" that their Shabbat schedules be accommodated. That would have been unheard of, Hirschorn added.

And though he credits his fellow students with having been "consistently supportive of my needs," Hirschorn noted that some residents at institutions that have shomer Shabbat programs have had difficult times.



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