

MY MEDICAL LICENSE. IS IT VALID INTERNATIONALLY?

This case is a continuation of the case presented in February 2026. It aims to explore further the issue of “a physician's duty to provide assistance” by placing it within an international context where other challenges arise.

CLINICAL CASE

Dr. Martin, an anesthesiologist, is a passenger on an *American Airlines flight from Madrid to New York*. She frequently travels to New York because her only daughter lives there. During the flight, one of the other passengers suffers a cardiorespiratory arrest. After several announcements over the intercom, and as no other physician comes forward, Dr. Martin, who is a Spanish national with the pertaining Medical license from Spain, steps in to assist the passenger. She is aided by two nurses, who are also Spanish nationals and hold Spanish medical licenses. They succeed in resuscitating the patient; however, despite their efforts, the patient is left in a vegetative state. The family has now filed a lawsuit against both the airline and the healthcare professionals who attended to the patient during the flight, citing the consequences of the care provided.

Dr. Martin prepared a report for her lawyer, outlining the details of the events and the resources available on the aircraft, which included an AED (automated external defibrillator), a Guedel airway, and vasoactive drugs, among others. She describes how she initially hesitated to intervene, aware that her medical license was not valid in the United States and that she was uncertain about the extent of her professional liability insurance coverage under the circumstances. She acted in good faith at all times and used all the resources available to her in an effort to save the patient's life. After receiving the lawsuit and realizing that her insurance policy excludes coverage for professional activity internationally she now questions whether she should refrain from intervening in the future or whether she is obliged to assist in similar situations going forward. She travels frequently to the United States, so this is a real concern for her.

ETHICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CASE

This ethical dilemma challenges Dr. Martin between her professional (and civic) duty to provide assistance, her psychological well-being, and her financial security, particularly given that she now faces legal proceedings. According to the code of Medical Ethics, a physician must act in emergencies, even when doing so may involve personal risk. This is both professional and civic in nature. Failure to intervene could constitute a failure to render assistance, thereby potentially compromising the patient's health and undermining the principle of solidarity toward fellow passengers.

With that said, in the context of this case, her medical qualifications are not recognized within the applicable jurisdiction. This lack of accreditation gives rise to her sense of legal vulnerability and heightens her concern of potential financial, and professional consequences.

POSSIBLE COURSES OF ACTION

- Refrain from treating the patient since you don't have the proper medical license to practice in the United States.
- Inform the flight crew of the situation so they can contact the airport's emergency center for guidance on the situation. .
- Recommend returning to Spain so you can treat the patient as a licensed Physician in Spain.
- Instruct the crew to land at the nearest airport so the patient may receive care as soon as possible.
- Inform the patient's travel companion of your situation and obtain their consent before proceeding.
- Knowing that you don't have a valid license, act in your capacity as an anesthesiologist as you are qualified to do so.
- Inform the crew that you don't have a license to practice in the US, but that you are an anesthesiologist, and are therefore acting at your own risk for the patient's benefit.
- After assisting the patient, provide them with your national identity number and Spanish medical license number.
- Help the patient as a normal citizen, and not as a healthcare professional. Do not disclose that you are a licensed medical professional in Spain. If asked to identify yourself later, only provide your national identity number.
- Begin resuscitation efforts without delay.

RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION

- Recommend landing at the nearest airport.
- Attempt to contact the airline's emergency services by phone to request guidance and assistance during the procedure. Request that a mobile ICU be dispatched to the landing area so that the passenger may be evacuated as soon as possible.

- Dr. Martin must assist the patient. Since her license is not valid in the United States, she must explain that she is acting as a civilian and not as a medical professional.
- If the passenger is traveling with companions, they will be informed of the situation and their consent will be obtained before proceeding. She should again explain that she is acting as a Spanish citizen.
- If identification is requested after the intervention, she should only provide her national identification number because she acted as a civilian and not as a licensed medical professional.
- Even if she does not have coverage she should report the lawsuit to her liability insurance provider.

DISCUSSION

As a general rule, physicians should not avoid their professional obligation in the face of an emergency. However, when abroad and traveling with foreign airlines (as in this case), one must take into account that not all countries have agreements for the recognition of academic degrees, and therefore the physician may not have a “legal umbrella” allowing them to act in a professional capacity. In the scenario described, under US regulations, Dr. Martin would not be accredited to practice as a physician.

So, what should Dr. Martin do in a similar situation in the future? In the presence of a life-threatening emergency, the patient must not be abandoned, and assistance must be provided. This is a civic duty, particularly for medical professional. Priority should be given to any U.S. Licensed physician; and only in their absence should she intervene, again clarifying that she is acting as a citizen rather than as a licensed physician in Spain. She must make that clear and that she is not acting in any professional capacity. Therefore, she should not provide her professional credentials to the airline.

Sgd.: ASISA-Lavinia Committee on Bioethics and Health Law
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