

Bodily Identity Integrity Disorder¹

Since she was a young child, Jewel Shuping dreamed of being blind. “When I was young my mother would find me walking in the halls at night, when I was three or four years old,” she says. “By the time I was six I remember that thinking about being blind made me feel comfortable.” She would stare at the sun for hours, hoping that it would damage her eyes. As a teenager, she began wearing thick black glasses and carrying a white cane. By the time she was 20 years old, she was fluent in braille. Shuping describes her desire to be blind as a “non-stop alarm that was going off” in her head. Finally, at nearly 30, she found a psychologist willing to help blind her by putting a couple of drops of drain cleaner in each eye. Though the process was painful, she remained hopeful: “all I could think was ‘I am going blind, it is going to be okay.’”² The drain cleaner severely damaged her eyes but did not render her completely blind, so she is not totally satisfied with the result. Nevertheless, she has said she is happy to be “much further along her path to blindness.”³ She explains: “I really feel this is the way I was supposed to be born, that I should have been blind from birth. When there's nobody around you who feels the same way, you start to think that you're crazy. But I don't think I'm crazy, I just have a disorder.”

Bodily Integrity Identity Disorder (BIID) is a rare condition where there is a conflict between a person's actual, physical body and their idea of how their body should be. It usually involves an able-bodied person who believes that they should be disabled in some way.⁴ The most common manifestation of the disorder is a desire to have a specific body part amputated. Getting such procedures done does not cure BIID. However, for many who have BIID, the desire to make their bodies match how they feel they are meant to be is so strong that they are willing to take desperate measures to make it happen. Such measures might include putting drain cleaner in their eyes like Jewel Shuping, cutting off their own limbs, or jumping off of cliffs in order to paralyze themselves.⁵

A doctor cannot amputate a healthy limb without risking his or her license. A Scottish surgeon who performed two such surgeries in the late nineties was banned from performing any more. He had given the issue considerable thought, consulted his professional organization, and received written permission from his hospital's chief executive. His patients were convinced that surgery was the only relief for their condition and were completely happy with the results of the procedures.⁶ One such patient says he finally feels like “a complete person” now that he is an amputee.⁷

STUDY QUESTIONS

- (1) In absence of a more effective way of managing BIID, is it in the interests of BIID patients to give them the body modifications they want?
- (2) If BIID patients are likely to resort to dangerous measures to modify their bodies, is this a good enough reason to allow doctors to perform these modifications?
- (3) Do BIID patients harm themselves when they modify their bodies to give themselves disabilities?

¹ This case is adapted from a 2016 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl (IEB) case, with permission. Please visit their website for more information about the IEB: <http://appe-ethics.org/ethics-bowl/>

² <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/real-life-stories/psychologist-blinds-woman-drain-cleaner-6552282>.

³ <http://www.snopes.com/2015/10/02/jewel-shuping-blind/>.

⁴ <http://biid.org>, 2016.

⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/03/22/health/psychology/at-war-with-their-bodies-they-seek-to-sever-limbs.html>

⁶ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1127127/>; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/625680.stm>.

⁷ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/632856.stm>

