

Working While Sick¹

Nearly 43 million private sector workers in the US hold jobs that do not offer paid sick leave. The majority of these workers are employed in the service sector, where interactions with customers form a key part of their jobs.

Kate, a server at a fast food restaurant called Blake's Burgers, is one of these workers. In the past, her bosses encouraged her to take the day off when she was sick, because coming in would put the health of her coworkers and customers at risk. Recently, however, the company cut her hours, and Kate could no longer afford to take a day off without pay.

A few months after the company cut her hours, Kate caught the flu and was unsure what to do. If she stayed home, she would lose the pay that she desperately needed, and run the risk of losing her job. She had been working for Blake's Burgers for many years, and she thought it was unfair that she could be fired for taking an action that would ultimately help the business.

On the other hand, going to work would pose a number of threats. Since Kate was likely contagious, she could get her coworkers sick, thereby confronting them with the same dilemma she faced now. Because her job involves handling food, she could also get her customers sick. Not only would this harm those customers, but it could have a negative effect on the business as a whole. After all, if people became sick from eating at Blake's Burgers, they would be more likely to avoid the establishment in the future, urge their friends to do the same, and ultimately harm the company's business.

On a national scale, the impact of Kate's dilemma is huge: The Center for American Progress estimates that unhealthy workers cost employers some \$160 billion a year in lost productivity. In addition, a substantial trend of workers continuing to perform their duties while sick is particularly concerning during moments of crisis and concern for public health, such as the currently developing COVID-19 "Coronavirus" outbreak across the United States and the world.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is Kate morally permitted to work while sick, given that she needs the money and needs to keep her job? Why or why not?
2. What, if anything, would change if Kate was a single mother whose children depend on her making money and keeping her job as well?
3. What, if anything, would change if Kate interacted with coworkers but not customers at work?

¹ This case was originally used in the National High School Ethics Bowl's 2016-2017 Case Set for Regional Competitions. We have brought it back and updated it in the wake of the 2020 COVID-19 ("Coronavirus") outbreak in the United States and across the world.