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Don't be cruel

THE ISSUE A Death Row inmate has filed a new challenge to Alabama's lethal injection procedures. It must be taken seriously.

Daniel Lee Siebert's latest challenge to Alabama's death penalty practices is sure to invite spite and scorn.

People don't like to hear serial killers whine about the particulars of how they will be put to death.

It's true Siebert hasn't done anything to earn much mercy. He was convicted of killing five Alabamians, including his girlfriend and her two young children. He has confessed to killing others across the country.

But the issue isn't what kind of person Siebert is. It's what kind of society we want to be. We profess to be a civilized society, one that affords certain rights and protections even to those who have committed terrible crimes.

So, our methods of punishment do matter. That is never more true than in the case of capital punishment, when we as a society decide that certain wrongdoers aren't just unfit to live among us but are unfit to live at all.

In Alabama and every other state that uses the death penalty, the current preferred method is lethal injection, which was developed as a more humane alternative to gas chambers, electric chairs and firing squads. But in recent years, inmates across the country have challenged lethal injection, saying the specific drugs and procedures used to carry out their sentences could leave them open to unconstitutional suffering. Some obvious problems in executions in other states have bolstered their arguments.

A specific concern has been that the drug sequence could leave an inmate conscious but paralyzed, unable to communicate the agony of a cruel, suffocating death.

Alabama has added a step to be used in future lethal injections just to address that possibility. Before injecting drugs that cause paralysis and cardiac arrest, a prison officer is supposed to call the inmate's name, pinch his arm and brush his eyelashes to ensure the inmate is unconscious.

In his new challenge, Siebert argues the officer who will test the inmates' response has no medical background and could make a grave mistake.

"The revision to the protocol is substantial, though inadequate to meet constitutional standards," Siebert's lawsuit says.

It's a concern that shouldn't be dismissed out of spite or scorn.

Already, the country is awaiting a decision from the U.S. Supreme Court on a challenge to lethal injection in Kentucky.

While most states stopped carrying out death sentences while awaiting a ruling on this matter, Alabama has forced courts to intervene to stop executions.

The temptation, apparently, is to disregard concerns about lethal injection as the self-pitying cries of killers who deserve anything but our mercy. That's understandable, but it's a mistake.

Trying to work out the details about lethal injection isn't about killers and what they did. It's about us as a society and what we're willing to do.

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