Health care reform: A call to action

Health care is a complicated subject, and the debate over health care reform is confusing to many Americans. Public statements and misstatements have added to the confusion for Catholics by misrepresenting the consistent position set forth by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on this important issue.

Considering the history of the Catholic Church in the area of health care, these misrepresentations and misunderstandings are puzzling. Catholic women religious were responsible for establishing some of the first hospitals in the United States. Today, Catholic health care facilities represent the largest not-for-profit health care system in the country.

The Catholic Church in the United States, locally and throughout the world, has been a pioneer in providing compassionate, quality care to those who are sick, especially the poor and vulnerable. That tradition of care continues today here in the Northwest and throughout our nation and world.

As Congress prepares to debate health care reform, it is important for all Catholics to have a clear understanding of our longstanding commitment to care for the sick, and the principles guiding the Catholic response to the current legislation before Congress. Equally important is the need for Catholic people to inform their consciences based on these principles and to take action so that reform will serve the common good.

**Deficiencies in legislation**

For decades, we bishops in the United States have strongly advocated for genuine health care reform that protects the life and dignity of all, from the moment of conception until natural death. So it is perplexing that some would misinterpret our opposition to the measures currently before Congress as opposition to universal coverage.

In the Catholic tradition, health care is a basic human right. Every person, created in the image and likeness of God, has a right to life and to those things necessary to sustain life, including affordable, quality health care. Based on our teaching, access to health care should not depend on where a person works, how much a family earns or where a person lives.

This teaching is rooted in the biblical call to heal the sick and to serve “the least of these.” It provides the foundation for our concern for human life and dignity and animates our efforts to promote the common good by ensuring the health and well-being of all.

The measures currently before Congress are regrettably deficient on the issues of abortion and conscience rights, and do not yet provide adequate access to health care for the poor and people living on the margins of civil society. Unless these deficiencies are corrected in reform legislation, our bishops’ conference will oppose it vigorously.

For more than 30 years, the Hyde amendment and other widely supported laws have prevented federal funding of elective abortions, but the health care reform bills advancing in Congress violate this policy.

If these measures go forward unchanged, Americans would be forced to subsidize abortions through their taxes and health insurance premiums.

**Action urgently needed**

No citizen should be required to pay for or participate in abortion. As pastors, we have made it clear that the longstanding federal restrictions on abortion funding and mandates must apply to any health care reform proposal in order to earn our support.

Making health care coverage affordable to families and increasing accessibility for the poor and marginalized among us are also among our priorities for reform. As bishops, our reform efforts prioritize protecting the life, dignity and health care of all.

With Congress debating various health care measures, action on this issue by Catholics is a matter of some urgency. As faithful citizens, Catholics have a responsibility to make their voices heard as this debate goes forward to ensure that health care reform protects the life and dignity of all people from the moment of conception until natural death.

I ask that all Catholics contact their congressional representatives and ask them to remove abortion funding and mandates from health care reform. Please contact your representative and senators and urge them to amend these bills with the pro-life amendments. If these amendments are not included in any reform measure that comes up for a vote, ask them to oppose it.

Information has been forwarded to parishes throughout the Archdiocese of Seattle that explains how you can send a message on this important issue. You may contact members of Congress by e-mail, phone calls or fax.

To send an instant e-mail to Congress, go to [www.usccb.org/action](http://www.usccb.org/action). You also can call the U.S. Capitol switchboard at 202-224-3121, or call your representative’s or senators’ local offices. Full contact information is available on the congressional Web sites at [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) and [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov).

As faithful citizens, we need to send a clear message that our elected officials should support an amendment to incorporate longstanding policies against abortion funding and in favor of conscience rights. I urge you to take action on this important issue and to pray for health care reform that protects the life and dignity of all.