



Hill Notes

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Health Care Reform

Our Position

The Catholic bishops of the United States have advocated for comprehensive health care reform leading to accessible and affordable health care for all for decades. The bishops have consistently insisted that access to decent health care is a basic safeguard of human life and an affirmation of human dignity from conception until natural death. The framework for comprehensive action should 1) ensure health care coverage that protects all human life; 2) provide access for all with a special concern for the poor; 3) respect pluralism, offering a variety of options and ensuring respect for the moral and religious convictions of patients and providers; and, 4) restrain costs while sharing costs equitably.

Facts about Health Care

Health care reform is a priority for the nation, new Congress and Administration. This overdue national discussion ought to begin with some basic facts. The fact is 46 million people in the wealthiest and most technologically advanced country in the world lack health care coverage. The fact is that \$1 of every \$6 spent in the United States is spent on health care. The fact is the United States ranks "near the bottom in healthy life expectancy at age 60" and 15th among 19 nations in deaths that would not have resulted if treated with timely and effective care. The fact is people who are uninsured are twice as likely not to receive follow-up care to an injury or new chronic condition. The fact is nearly one million babies a year do not see the day of their birth as a result of abortion on demand. As a nation this is not morally right... and we can do better.

Our Experience

Health care is not just another issue for the Church. It is a fundamental issue of human life and dignity. Health care ministry is one way the Church continues Jesus' mission of healing and care for the "least of these" (Mt. 25). The Catholic Church provides health care, purchases health care and picks up the pieces of a failing health care system. The Catholic community sees and serves the sick and uninsured in our emergency rooms, shelters and on the doorsteps of our parishes. One out of six patients is cared for in Catholic hospitals. We bring strong convictions and everyday experience to the issue of health care. Our faith requires Catholics to join with others in public debate and to share Catholic teaching and experience in the search for effective health care reform.

The bishops' statement, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, stresses that "affordable and accessible health care is an essential safeguard of human life and a fundamental human right." Catholic teaching calls on society to respect and protect life from the moment of conception until natural death. All people have a right to health care regardless of where they work, where they come from or how much money they have. Quality health care should be accessible to every person as a part of basic respect for human life and dignity.

What do the bishops mean by health care for "all"?

All people need and should have access to comprehensive, quality health care that they can afford. Access to health care should not depend on a person's stage of life, where or whether one works, how much one earns, where one lives, or where one was born. Health care is a social good, and accessible and affordable health care for everyone benefits both individuals and society as a whole. The moral measure of any health care reform proposal is whether it protects human life and dignity and offers affordable and accessible health care to all.

Does support for health care for all mean support for a single-payer system?

Health care is a basic human right. All parts of society need to cooperate to assure this right. One of the basic functions of government is to undertake efforts to promote the common good. This means reform efforts should be in partnership with all stakeholders including employers, charitable organizations, health care providers and government. Health care for all does not necessarily mean support for a single-payer system.

If a new health care system were to cover all people, wouldn't it be too expensive?

The financial responsibility should be shared by all stakeholders. True reform will restrain overall health costs so that sufficient resources will be available to cover all people without sacrificing quality or accessibility. Reform should create: 1) effective measures to reduce waste, inefficiency, and unnecessary care; 2) measures that control rising costs; and 3) incentives to individuals and providers for effective and economical use of resources.

A fair health care system assures society's obligation to finance universal access to comprehensive health care in an equitable fashion, based on ability to pay. Cost-sharing arrangements should avoid creating barriers to effective care for the poor and vulnerable.

How should health care legislation deal with abortion and other life issues?

We strongly oppose inclusion of abortion services as part of a national health care benefit. For decades, the Congress has decided not to compel people to pay for abortions with their tax dollars and this policy should remain in place. We would also oppose inclusion of technologies that similarly fail to uphold the sanctity and dignity of life. No health care reform plan that compels us or others to pay for the destruction of human life should (or would) pass Congress and be signed into law. The surest road to defeat for affordable and accessible health care for all is to insist that all Americans must pay for abortion. We urge Congress and the Administration to strengthen, or at least keep in place, the restrictions on federal funding for abortions. In our view, expanding access to health care cannot come at the expense of the lives of unborn children.

Why should the Catholic community be included in a debate on health care reform?

The Catholic community offers a moral tradition and vast experience in health care as providers, consumers and employers. The Catholic community provides, pays for, and picks up the pieces of a failed health care system. Last year, Catholic health care hospitals provided health care to one out of six patients in the United States. The Catholic health care system is the largest non-profit health care system in the country.

Health care reform should continue to ensure respect for religious and ethical values in the delivery of health care for consumers and for individual and institutional providers. All stakeholders should have access to a health care system that respects their moral and ethical beliefs.

What role should prevention have in health care reform?

One priority goal of a health care system should be maintaining good health and offering preventative care. Maintaining good health is the responsibility of individuals as well as health professionals. Improving health education and literacy will help patients play a greater role in their health care. Incentives for healthy nutrition and exercise should also be included.

For more information:

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