

What Does the Catholic Church Say About Health Care? Some Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

Question: What is the Church's vision for sound health care reform?

Answer: The United States bishops have for decades advocated a reform of the nation's health care system based upon fundamental moral principles. The Church holds that access to basic health care is a universal human right and not a privilege of the wealthy. Of course, what constitutes basic health care will differ from country to country depending upon its level of development. Of paramount importance in any reform effort is that it should protect and promote the dignity of every human person from conception to natural death. This would rule out any effort to expand access to abortion or euthanasia. In addition, a sound reform effort will also be guided by the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. In the end, sound reform should produce a health care system that pursues the common good, preserves pluralism and a variety of options, protects freedom of conscience, and both restrains and distributes costs fairly.

Question: What are the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity and how do they relate to current federal efforts to reform health care?

Answer: Solidarity is more than a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress for those who do not have access to basic health care. It is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself and one's country to the common good. It is based upon the conviction that we are all responsible for each other, which includes assuring the universal right to basic health care. Subsidiarity, on the other hand, refers to the necessity of defending and promoting the freedom of individuals, families, healthcare professionals and institutions, associations and states to properly function and make health care decisions without unnecessary interference by the federal government. On the basis of this principle, communities of a higher order must help communities of a lower order to fulfill their proper roles — they must not usurp their rights or run roughshod over them simply in order to achieve their agenda. Those of the higher must not absorb functions of the lower except in extraordinary circumstances and only for as long as absolutely necessary. With regard to health care reform, while under the principle of solidarity we want to ensure basic health care to every person in the United States, we also want, under the principle of subsidiarity, to do so in a way that does not lead to a loss of free enterprise and initiative and to an inordinate increase of bureaucratic agencies. Solidarity keeps us from an individualistic indifference to the plight of the poor and uninsured. Subsidiarity keeps us from "top-down" decisions by the federal government in the health care arena.

Question: Are the bishops trying to promote an anti-abortion agenda through the current health care reform effort?

Answer: No. The bishops will continue to fight against the evil of abortion by all means available. Even so, they have not demanded that urgently needed health care reform become a vehicle for advancing the pro-life cause, nor do they believe it should be used to advance the cause of abortion or euthanasia. In this sense, the bishops have asked that health care reform be "abortion neutral," that is, that existing laws and policies with

regard to abortion and abortion funding be preserved, allowing health care reform to move forward and serve its legitimate goals.

Question: Why are the bishops insistent that healthcare reform be “abortion neutral”?

Answer: Abortion advocacy groups are trying to use health care reform to advance their agenda by having the federal government establish abortion as a basic health benefit, guaranteeing “access” nationwide and requiring Americans to subsidize abortion with their tax dollars or insurance premiums. This would reverse a tradition of federal laws and policies that have severely restricted federal funding and promotion of abortion in all major health programs for over three decades (the Hyde amendment, 1976), and have respected the right of health care providers to decline involvement in abortion or abortion referrals. The bishops cannot, in good conscience, let such an important and pressing issue as health care reform be hijacked by the abortion agenda. No health care reform plan should compel anyone to pay for the killing of innocent human beings, whether through government funding or mandatory coverage of abortion. Any such action would be morally wrong and politically foolish.

Question: What kind of actions do the bishops recommend to make basic health care accessible for all and genuinely affordable?

Answer: The bishops have urged Congress to limit premiums and co-payments for lower income families in order to ease barriers to obtaining coverage or seeing a doctor. They have also urged Congress to provide states with resources to expand coverage and ensure sufficient funding for safety net clinics, hospitals and other providers serving lower income or uninsured patients.