



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL
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PROVIDING HEALTH CARE AND PAYING FOR IT FALLS TO THE HEALTHY

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

Many observers expect 2007 to be a time of serious debate over how to provide and pay for health care in Madison and Washington. Since Catholic teaching holds that health care is a right for all, essential to our responsibility to develop ourselves and participate in life, this is a debate with moral implications. Catholics need to be a part of it.

There is general agreement that health care should be available to all. Still, as with so many issues, “the devil is in the details.” This is certainly the case when we start to talk about how to share the financial costs of providing health insurance and care for the needy.

It is true that a sizeable portion of the uninsured are those who choose to do without health insurance. Generally, but not always, such people are younger, in good health and able to afford the occasional visit to the doctor. Some argue that they take responsibility for their own health. They don’t expect help paying for their health care nor want to be asked to help others pay for theirs.

Such a view is understandable given our free enterprise individualistic culture. But such a view ignores the principle of solidarity – that theme in Catholic teaching that reminds us that human life is social and that we are connected to each other. Solidarity is that principle we apply in living out the truth articulated by Pope John Paul II that “all are truly responsible for all.”

The proposition that each of us should be responsible for our own health care also overlooks the reality of our lived experience. For when any of us fall ill, we rely on those who are healthy to care for us. Sick children rely on their parents for care, food, bathing and the other needs they can’t meet on their own. As we age and are laid low by illnesses more serious than the stomach flu or chicken pox, it is healthy professionals and relatives who provide our care and treatment.

And just as those of us blessed with good health to provide care and treatment to those who are sick, so are those blessed with financial resources called upon to help provide the funds to pay for the care and treatment of the sick. For when our turn comes, we may find ourselves unable to fully finance our health care.

Illness doesn't make ethical judgments and getting sick is not a character flaw. Jesus' call to heal those who are sick does not include a "worthiness test." Our proper concern that each be responsible for making good lifestyle choices does not trump our obligation to help those who did not.

In the year ahead, we citizens will be asked to evaluate plans to improve access to affordable health care and insurance. As we do so, we may wish to consider whether reform proposals that ask more of those who are financially and physically well might not be an appropriate way to apply the principle of solidarity and the preferential option for the poor to a vexing policy question.

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