



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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BISHOPS' PRINCIPLES FOR HEALTH CARE REFORM CAN BE USEFUL IN COMING DEBATE

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

As the debate over the state budget enters its final phase, health care reform will move to center stage. It is a critical issue for all of us and one with definite moral implications.

Capitol observers expect Senate Democrats to support a proposal for comprehensive health care reform. One aspect of the debate will be whether the plan is added to the budget bill or dealt with as separate legislation.

Either way the debate will be one of the most important of the decade.

And it is a debate in which Catholics as faithful citizens should play a key part.

At this point, the bishops' role in the debate is not to endorse a specific approach or solution to health care reform, though at some point they may choose to do so. Rather, the Conference will focus on 1) reminding people of the importance of this issue, and 2) identifying the principles that should guide the debate.

Clearly health care as an issue directly impacts human life and dignity. Forty-four years ago in his encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth), Pope John XXIII identified medical care and security during times of illness as basic human rights. Fourteen years ago, the Bishops of the United States reaffirmed that stance. "Health care is more than a commodity," they wrote. "It is an essential safeguard of human life and dignity. We believe our people's health care should not depend on where they work, how much their parents earn or where they live."

Here in Wisconsin, the Catholic Conference has suggested that health care reform advocacy should focus on four key principles:

First, any reform must make concern for the poor and universal access a high priority. Those whom the current system fails should receive first consideration for allocation of health care resources.

Reform must also convey a genuine respect for human life and human dignity. The right to health care is rooted in the intrinsic value of all human life. Thus a reformed system should insure access to care for persons in the womb, throughout infancy and childhood, into adult life and at the end of life, when care is possible even when cure is not.

*Reform must pursue the common good and **preserve pluralism**. A reformed health care system need not be a bureaucratic behemoth. Rather, a reformed system should build upon the established resources of the private and public sector, enhancing their effectiveness as partners. Further, any system must continue to respect the religious and ethical values of both individuals and institutions that provide care.*

*Reform must serve to **restrain costs**. There is a need to correct the imbalance between our financial investment in health care and our ability to provide a just distribution of health care services.*

The WCC is urging Catholics and others to assess any health care reform plan in light of these principles. As we do so, we must recognize that people of good will can differ over how to achieve the goals in these principles. But the debate over how to realize these ideals is much different than an argument over whether we should try to achieve these goals at all.

Whether health care reform is part of the budget or dealt with later is a matter our political leaders will determine, but change is certainly in the air. And it is a change that needs to happen.

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