



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE TESTIFIES ON MANDATED CARE FOR RAPE VICTIMS

On April 25, 2007, the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, the public policy voice of Wisconsin's bishops, offered informational testimony on a bill mandating new treatment procedures for victims of sexual assault.

The proposal, Senate Bill 129, directs health care agencies that provide emergency services to dispense emergency contraception to rape victims upon the patient's request. The bill includes an exception to the mandate when a victim is determined to be "pregnant, as indicated by a test for pregnancy."

Supporters of the bill referenced a survey conducted by a rape victims' advocacy group that indicates a number of Wisconsin hospitals do not provide emergency contraception to victims of sexual assault.

At a public hearing before the Wisconsin Senate Committee on Health and Human Services, Kim Wadas, Associate Director for Health Care at the WCC, emphasized that Catholic teaching requires health care facilities to treat victims of sexual assault with compassionate care.

"From our perspective, we believe this bill is not necessary as Catholic health care already provides victims of sexual assault with appropriate and compassionate medical care," stated Wadas.

"Catholics regard health care as a healing ministry, grounded in our religious and moral values," she continued. "On a national basis, these ethical and religious values are articulated through the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*. Some perceive that our moral and ethical principles, led by these directives, preclude Catholic health facilities from making contraception available to rape victims. This is not the case."

Citing *Ethical and Religious Directive* (ERD) no. 36, Wadas noted "A female who has been raped should be able to defend herself against a potential conception from the sexual assault. If, after appropriate testing, there is no evidence that conception has occurred already, she may be treated with medications that would prevent ovulation, sperm capacitation, or fertilization."

Wadas emphasized that Catholic institutions have a duty to ensure that treatments do not cause the taking of an unborn child's life. To insure this does not occur, Catholic hospitals routinely test to establish a woman is not pregnant before administering emergency contraception to rape victims.

Wadas testified that WCC's position on this bill could change, however, if provisions within the bill were subject to interpretations that threatened Catholic practice.

"As regards SB 129, it must be understood that our lack of opposition is contingent upon two points," said Wadas. "First, the language exempting hospitals from providing emergency contraception to a victim known to be pregnant shall be interpreted as allowing Catholic hospitals the flexibility to follow testing protocols that establish with moral certitude that a pregnancy has not occurred. Science is providing medicine with new tools everyday and our Catholic hospitals must retain the freedom to use the latest technology to ensure that treatment does not result in the taking of a human life."

"Second, we understand that this bill will not affect the rights that hospitals and staff enjoy under current Wisconsin law, namely to refrain from participating in procedures that destroy a human embryo or fetus."

The Committee took no action at the hearing on this bill.

After the hearing, Wadas stated that the WCC plans to continue to closely monitor SB129's progress. "Our goal is to allow Catholic facilities to continue to do what they always have done," said Wadas. "Our agencies have always provided compassionate care for victims of sexual assault and will continue to do so in a manner that does not violate our Catholic values."

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