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Approach to health care reform speaks volumes about our values

BY ARCHBISHOP JOHN C. NIENSTEDT; THURSDAY, 27 AUGUST 2009



This summer has been marked by persistent and, at times, even contradictory reports on the work being done by both houses of Congress regarding the sweeping "health care re-form" legislation that President Obama wants to sign in-to law as early as September.

No one doubts the wisdom of addressing this complex issue. Reform is needed. But the underlying question remains: What kind of health care reform do we want?

Given the vast range of ethical and moral issues involved, this legislation will manifest in a clear and even remarkable way what values we will hold or fail to uphold as a nation. In a very real way, this legislation will define our national character.

Bishop William Murphy, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee for Domestic Justice and Human Development, sent a letter in July to the members of Congress offering as a guide four ethical principles that any health care reform should reflect:

1. A truly universal health care policy imbued with respect for human life and dignity.
2. Access for all with a special concern for the poor and inclusion of legal immigrants.
3. Pursuing the common good while preserving pluralism, including freedom of conscience and variety of options.
4. Restraining costs and applying them equitably across the spectrum of payers.

Under the first point, Bishop Murphy went on to explain that the church is strongly opposed to the inclusion of abortion as part of a national health care plan. He stated: "No health care reform plan should compel us or others to pay for the destruction of life, whether through government funding or mandatory coverage of abortion." The actual situation, however, has become far more complex since it now appears that pro-abortion advocates hope to achieve their aims without mentioning the word "abortion." Thus, a bill proposed by Sen. Ted Kennedy grants authority to a "Medical Advisory Council," appointed by the secretary of the Health and Human Services, to decide what procedures are funded. This council would specify what services will or will not be included in the government's insurance plans.

At present, the secretary of Health and Human Services is Kathleen Sebelius, allegedly a practicing Catholic, but an aggressively pro-choice politician. It is hard to imagine that her selection of candidates for membership on that council would be willing to restrict access to abortion services

Of course, none of this should come as a surprise to anyone. Speaking to the Planned Parenthood organization during the presidential campaign, then Sen. Obama made clear his thinking on this matter, which was backed up by his voting record in the Senate. He stated: "In my mind, reproductive care is essential care, basic care, so it is at the center, the heart of the plan that I propose." (In this context, "reproductive care" is a euphemism for "abortion.")

Until now, federal agencies or programs (as well as state or local governments receiving federal funds) are forbidden under the Weldon amendment, approved by Congress each year since 2004, to discriminate against individual or institutional health care providers or insurers who decline to provide, pay for, provide coverage of, or refer for abortion. The new health care program, as now proposed, would change all that. That is why an explicit statement in the bill is needed which asserts that government insurance would not cover abortion services.

In addition to Bishop Murphy's four points, I would add a fifth. I believe that it should also be explicitly stated that euthanasia, either actively prescribed or passively encouraged, should not be permitted. This is a serious matter for senior citizens. The Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions recently defeated an amendment that would have prevented the denial of health care benefits to patients on the basis of age, expected length of life, or of the patient's present or predicted disability or quality of life. Without such assurances, the same "Medical Advisory Council" could determine that those who are over a certain age limit are not worthy of further medical treatment and thus none would be provided.

Far-reaching implications As you can see, this legislation has far-reaching moral implications for us as a people and as a nation. What it permits and what it disallows speaks volumes about the values that we hold dear and are willing to fight to defend. I urge you to inform yourself about this critical piece of legislation. (Go online to the USCCB Web site: www.usccb.org/healthcare). Then, call your senators and representatives to express your opinion. For the Senate, call (202) 224-3121 and ask to speak with your senator; call (202) 225-3121 to speak with your representative. If you do not know the name of either, give the operator your zip code and you will be connected to the correct office. This is, in my mind, one of the most important issues of our lifetime. Please let your thoughts be known. God bless you!