

CATHOLICS FOR CHOICE

IN GOOD CONSCIENCE

We Believe in Healthcare Reform

The healthcare system in the United States is broken. Forty-seven million people are uninsured and 30 million more are underinsured. With the current state of the economy, men and women around the country are struggling to make ends meet. They are making the tough decisions between putting food on the table and going to the doctor. Now, more than ever, we need a system that works for everyone. We need healthcare reform.

As Catholics, we believe that healthcare is a right, not a privilege. Keeping in mind Catholic social teaching which calls for a preferential option for the poor and knowing that those living in poverty are the most adversely affected by our healthcare system, we believe in a universal healthcare system that provides comprehensive healthcare to every person living in the United States.

As President Barack Obama, his Administration and Congress work to repair and rebuild our healthcare system, the Catholic bishops and their conservative allies are undermining this work by seeking to obliterate any sexual and reproductive healthcare services from the plan, mainly through spreading myths about the nature of the healthcare reform proposals.

While it is important to debunk these myths, we also cannot risk missing the forest for the trees. Not only must we debunk any myths about healthcare reform, we must also speak out in favor of including sexual and reproductive healthcare in any healthcare reform plan.

We believe that contraception should not just be affordable, it should be free.

Oftentimes, women and men living in poverty choose less-costly contraceptive options, if they choose to use contraceptives at all. When contraception is not free and when insurance only covers certain contraceptives, the freedom to choose which contraceptive best fits one's lifestyle is taken away. We believe that everyone, regardless of their socioeconomic status, should have that choice.

Providing contraceptives free of charge will save taxpayer money. For every one dollar spent by the federal government to provide

contraception to people living in poverty through Title X and Medicaid, it saves over four dollars. It's not just good for the soul; it is good for the pocketbooks of the American people.

Currently, healthcare reform plans include provisions that would allow states to use federal funds to provide birth control assistance to women who do not qualify for Medicaid. Otherwise, the coverage of contraception remains the same—good but not great.

As access to free contraception provides men and women with the resources they need to lead happy and healthy lives and saves money, including provisions for free contraception ought to be obvious to the architects of healthcare reform.

We believe that abortion should be federally funded and covered by all insurance companies.

Abortion has emerged, not surprisingly given the myopic mindset of social conservatives, as a key issue in the healthcare reform debate. Fear mongering has become all too common, with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and others demanding that any mention of abortion be stripped from the healthcare reform plan.

The bishops' protest to the inclusion of abortion in healthcare reform is particularly disturbing given their peculiar view on sexual and reproductive health—a view that is not generally shared by Catholics or the American public. The bishops would do well to remind themselves of the declarations of the Second Vatican Council on religious freedom for all. It goes against these principles for the bishops to require healthcare reform proposals that will affect all Americans—Catholic and non-Catholic—to conform to the minority outlook of the church hierarchy on sexual and reproductive health.

Some antichoice groups have suggested that the president's healthcare reform plan will overturn the Hyde Amendment, which restricts federal funding of abortion, and force all insurance companies to cover the procedure. Although this is blatantly untrue, we believe that the healthcare reform plan should indeed

include federal funding for abortion and require insurance companies to cover this vital procedure.

Other groups have suggested that abortion should be left out of the debate because it is too divisive. Here, they are wrong. A poll by the bishops themselves found that 89 percent of American adults believe that abortion should be provided in some or all cases.

All of these groups, however, neglect to mention that abortion is a legal medical procedure in the United States and should be covered in healthcare reform. Women's lives depend on it.

We believe that all men and women should be able to access affordable assisted reproductive technology services.

Just as men and women need access to family planning services in order to choose when and if they have children, those who are unable to conceive but wish to have children must also be supported.

Currently, assisted reproductive technology (ART) services are generally reserved for only those of means due to high costs and limited insurance coverage for these procedures. In states that mandate insurance coverage for ART procedures, however, the rate of utilization is nearly three times that in states that do not mandate coverage.

In addition to helping men and women expand their families, covering ART is also economically advantageous for the country. For instance, the cost of in vitro fertilization comes back seven-fold once the child enters the workforce and pays taxes.

Income level should never be a determinate of who does and does not receive treatment for infertility.

We believe that women who choose to continue their pregnancy should have access to quality pre- and postnatal care.

Every year, nearly one million pregnant women from the United States do not receive adequate medical attention before or after giving birth. Maternity and childbirth costs far outweigh costs for any other medical procedure. Due to the high costs of these procedures, pregnant women across the country have found that the services are profit-driven rather than compelled by evidence about quality maternity care.

All pregnant women should have access to quality maternity care and we are pleased that currently healthcare reform proposals will cover all pre- and postnatal care. However, the quality of care currently administered under private insurers and Medicaid plans also needs to be vastly improved.

Just as women who choose to end a pregnancy should be supported, so too must women who choose to continue a pregnancy. Merely covering the costs of pre- and postnatal care is

not enough. Healthcare reform proposals should also improve the quality of pre- and postnatal care.

We believe that access to HIV prevention, care and treatment should be covered.

Nearly half of people living with HIV/AIDS in the United States lack access to the healthcare services they need. Many living with HIV are considered "too healthy" to obtain Medicaid benefits but cannot afford or are denied private insurance coverage. Because private insurers often refuse to cover people with HIV, only one in five people living with HIV have private insurance coverage.

Healthcare reform efforts must include ways to provide coverage for all people living with HIV and also include strong provisions on prevention. With nearly 60,000 people newly infected with HIV each year in the United States, the rate of new HIV infections remains disturbingly high.

Luckily, the healthcare reform plan does include provisions on HIV/AIDS. The plan will allow states to extend Medicaid coverage to thousands of low-income people living with HIV who are currently "too healthy" to obtain coverage and also increase the number of people who benefit from the AIDS Drug Assistance program. Finally, the plan contains several prevention and wellness provisions that will increase access to voluntary HIV testing and other prevention methods. More can always be done, but this is a good start.

We believe in healthcare reform.

Surely, the church hierarchy and their conservative allies will continue to wave their flags against any inclusion of sexual and reproductive health in healthcare reform. However, bowing to the cries of this minority will be gravely harmful to men and women throughout the country.

An overwhelming 71 percent of Americans support provisions for sexual and reproductive health in healthcare reform, according to a poll by the National Women's Law Center. Last November, a majority of Catholics voted for the prochoice presidential candidate knowing that he maintains common sense values on sexual and reproductive health. Catholics for Choice stands with President Obama and this majority who understand the fundamental need for sexual and reproductive healthcare services in the United States.

Sexual and reproductive healthcare is a vital part of the well-being of our society. When men and women have access to high-quality sexual and reproductive healthcare, our country is healthier and stronger. And without a doubt, we can all agree that a stronger country is better for everyone.

Your voice as a Catholic who believes in more choices for your fellow Americans is critical. Do not let a handful of bishops and their antichoice allies speak for you. Tell your congressional representative today that Catholics want choice in healthcare. ■