Five Tenets of Authentically Compassionate Health Care Reform

By Carrie Handy, Respect Life Coordinator

“Our nation’s health care system serves too few and costs too much. A major national debate on how to assure access for all, restrain costs, and increase quality is moving to the center of American public life.”

These were the introductory comments in *A Framework for Comprehensive Health Care Reform: Protecting Human Life, Promoting Human Dignity, Pursuing the Common Good*, a document that was issued by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Domestic Social Policy Committee in 1993, more than fifteen years ago. Clearly, the health care reform debate currently taking place in Congress is the latest chapter of the ongoing efforts to address our nation’s health care problems and inequities.

While consistently advocating work to reform the nation’s health care system, Catholic leaders have also expressed concern that reforms may be enacted that do not adequately insure protection for the unborn and the conscience rights of health care workers.

In a May, 2009 letter to Congress, Bishop William F. Murphy, Chairman of the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, wrote, “While we support reforming our nation’s health care system, we must also be clear in strongly opposing inclusion of abortion as part of a national health care benefit (and) we also
oppose inclusion of other procedures or technologies that attack or undermine the sanctity and dignity of life.”

Early in July, the USCCB Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development called on Catholics to speak up and tell congressional representatives what to include—and to leave out—of legislation. They urged Catholics to ask legislators to ensure that the following be part of health care reform legislation: (1) coverage for all people from conception until natural death; (2) a continued ban on federal funding for abortion; (3) pursuit of the common good and preservation of pluralism, including freedom of conscience; (4) restraint on costs, and to apply costs equitably among payers; (5) access for all, with a special concern for the poor.

Unfortunately, recent developments indicate an increasing likelihood that health care reform proposals currently being advanced will, in fact, include taxpayer funding of abortion, even though Republicans as well as at least 2 two dozen conservative Democrats have indicated they will not support such legislation. In mid-July, Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-Md.) won support in the Senate Health Committee for her amendment ensuring that women’s health clinics and HIV/AIDS clinics, including Planned Parenthood, be considered “essential providers” in any health reform legislation, paving the way for taxpayer funding of abortion.

There is also much disagreement over how to fund a government-sponsored health care plan which proposes to pay for coverage for the nearly 50 million Americans who do not have it, at an estimated cost of about $1.2 trillion.

Despite such obstacles, President Obama has pledged to advance health care legislation quickly, making it increasingly urgent that the voices of Catholics be
considered in the decision-making process. In *A Framework for Comprehensive Health Care Reform*, the Bishops wrote, “Our approach to health care is shaped by a simple but fundamental principle: ‘Every person has a right to adequate health care. This right flows from the sanctity of human life and the dignity that belongs to all human persons, who are made in the image of God.’”

To help secure legislation that respects the sanctity of human life and the five principles listed above, Vermon ters should contact Representative Peter Welch, and Senators Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders to express their concerns.

Finally, let us not forget the importance of prayer in our efforts to advocate for the protection and respect of all human life. As this article goes to press, the Church celebrates the Feast Day for St. Camillus de Lillus (July 18), patron of Doctors and of the Sick. Together, let us ask for his prayerful intercession on behalf of all who are sick and in need of quality health care as well as those who are entrusted with reforming our health care system.

For more information about the most current developments and recommendations from the USCCB on health care reform, go to the Respect Life Topics page at [www.vermontcatholic.org](http://www.vermontcatholic.org) or directly to [http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/national/2009-07-02-alert-health-care.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/national/2009-07-02-alert-health-care.pdf)