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Getting health care reform morally right

By Father Douglas Clark

The patient is clearly ailing. Because he is consuming an increasing amount of the resources available to him, he is getting fatter all the time. His vital signs are erratic. His attending physicians cannot agree on a diagnosis and therefore are squabbling about the best course of treatment. And they are under increasing pressure to hurry up, diagnose and cure the patient before it's too late.

The patient is the American health care system.

While Congress is adjourned for its summer vacation, the American people have an opportunity to reflect on the state of health care in this great country, to assess the various diagnoses being offered and to ponder the proposed courses of treatment being debated, American Catholics should take advantage of this opportunity to reflect on the moral principles of their tradition as they relate to legislation being crafted, as well as on its economic, social and political aspects. To do so, they would do well to follow the reports and analyses on the Web site sponsored by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and carried in the Southern Cross.

Regarding the diagnosis of what ails the American health care system (or systems), the Catholic tradition questions the rationing of health care on the basis of wealth. For Americans with the financial wherewithal to afford first-class health insurance or those eligible for Medicare, their health care is arguably the best in the world. For those without health insurance, their prospects for decent medical treatment are severely limited.

Yes, the law requires hospitals to treat them, but the quality of care—think of the chaos of many emergency rooms—is hardly comparable to that available to the insured.

Pope Benedict XVI alludes to this discrepancy in his recent encyclical, "Charity in Truth." The pope points out the contrast between a presumed "right to excess" in affluent societies and the "lack of food, drinkable water, basic instruction and elementary health care in areas of the underdeveloped world." The same contrast exists within societies, notably in this vast country, between the richer and poorer levels of society. Those well off seem to regard it as their right to enjoy the best of food and drink, the finest education, and superlative health care, even to excess, while ignoring the paucity of all these things available to the poorer members of the community.

Pope Benedict notes not only the contrast between "claims to a right of 'excess' and even to transgression and vice" among the affluent and the various lacks of the poor, but also a link between such claims and such lacks. "The link consists of this: individual rights, when detached from a framework of duties which grants them their full meaning, can run wild, leading to an escalation of demands which is effectively unlimited and indiscriminate. An overemphasis on rights leads to a disregard for duties. Duties set a limit on rights because they point to the anthropological and ethical framework of which rights are a part, in this way ensuring that they do not become license."

In the context of the health care debate, claims of rights must be balanced by a sense of duty. For example, those whose employment provides them with good insurance which in turn gives them access to premium health care are understandably concerned that their access to it may be curtailed under the proposed legislation. They may justifiably argue for the right to retain their insurance and the consequent access to superior care. But they should also acknowledge their duty to contribute to better care for all those who presently lack the means to afford such insurance and such care. In other words, if the affluent have the right to claim good medical treatment, then they also have a corresponding duty to contribute to better treatment for others for the sake of the common good. In the end, it



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is a matter of good stewardship, the best use of our God-given resources for all.

Regarding the proposed treatment for the ailing system, Catholics should insist that the dignity of the human person be respected at all stages of life, from conception to natural death. They should strongly oppose any proposed legislation that would mandate funding or coverage of immoral procedures, namely abortion. They should further insist that no one be compelled to participate in such procedures, by means of a "conscience clause" written into the law.

As the debate over health care reform heats up after the summer recess, Catholic citizens should make their voices heard in the marketplace, to insure that both the diagnosis of the patient and the remedies prescribed are consistent with moral principles.

We need to get health reform morally right.

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