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Walking the walk amidst the health care talk

By Sister Mary Ann Walsh, RSM

At Providence Hospital, barely five miles from the U.S. Capitol, a broken arm gets you a cast -- and a new pair of shoes. A pain in your right side leads to an appendectomy - - and a new shirt. At Providence, homeless patients find quality medical care and practical assistance at the Sister's Clothes Closet, which provides everything from new shoes and undergarments to lightly used or new shirts and pants. Providence Health Foundation buys them or collects them from donors for patients who need them.

That's typical of the care provided through the Catholic Church and its nationwide network of hospitals. The Catholic Church walks the walk on health care. Its voice deserves to be heard. The church seeks four things in health care reform:

1. Respect for life and dignity, from conception to natural death.
2. Access for all, especially the poor and legal immigrants.
3. Pluralism, both through freedom of conscience and a variety of health care options.
4. Equitable cost, applied fairly across the spectrum of payers.

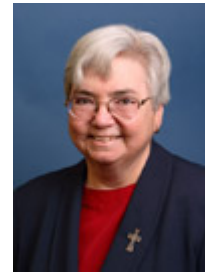
What the church does not want is abortion. Abortion does not cure people; it snuffs out human life. The Hyde Amendment precludes using federal funds for abortion, and that same restriction ought to govern programs emerging from health care reform.

If there's anything that will sink a health care reform bill, it's including a procedure that more than half the nation finds morally and fiscally repugnant. Americans do not want to make a fiscal sacrifice for the taking of innocent life. Catholic hospitals provide threads of steel in the nation's frayed health care fabric. They serve everyone. In Baltimore, for example, when the city was yielding to urban blight, Mercy Medical Center refused to join the exodus from the inner city.

While others escaped, Mercy Medical (named for its founders, the Sisters of Mercy) stayed. Today, it is the city's first line of defense for injured police and firefighters. Mercy Medical's commitment to the poor can be measured in real dollars. In the most recent fiscal year (2008), the hospital and its affiliated long-term care facility, Stella Maris, underwrote the cost of care for persons unable to pay to the tune of \$39.8 million dollars.

At Providence, founded at the behest of President Lincoln by the Daughters of Charity, administrators provided \$17.3 million in uncompensated care to the poor the same year. Catholic hospitals respect the life of everyone, from the newly conceived to those fading into the eternal light. Quality care trumps a patient's financial status, race or religion. In the U.S., one out of every six patients needing a hospital admission goes to a Catholic hospital. These hospitals cost about \$84.6 billion to run, including at least \$5.7 billion worth of donated services.

Many Catholic hospitals were started by nuns when public hospitals wouldn't provide care for the indigent. Today, the focus on those most in need continues, as people of all socio-economic levels find care -- not just in these hospitals, but also in their outreach services in the community. The church's commitment to U.S. health care can be documented in hard numbers: 624 hospitals; 499 long-term nursing care facilities; 164 home health agencies; 41 hospice organizations; and 773 other health care facilities, such as those that offer assisted living, adult day care and senior housing.



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The American Hospital Association reported in its 2007 annual survey that Catholic hospitals provide nearly 17 million emergency room visits and more than 92.7 million outpatient visits in one year alone. Catholic hospitals counted 5.5 million admissions the same year, according to the Catholic Health Association.

Rooted in respect for the intrinsic dignity of human life, the church has the moral authority to speak out on health care. Its extensive reach adds further authority born of knowledge and experience. When it comes to health care reform, Congress and the White House need to hear the church out.

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