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## A Catholic litmus test for national health care reform

*BY PAUL LONG*

The Catholic Church has long supported genuine health care reform. Catholic moral tradition teaches that health care is a basic human right, essential to protecting human life and dignity. Catholic hospitals, clinics and long-term care facilities provide quality health care to millions.

Dioceses, institutions and ministries purchase health care for many thousands of employees and their families. The church's emergency rooms, shelters, clinics and charities pick up the pieces of a failing health care system.

Unfortunately, the current proposals in Congress remain seriously flawed. Congress must address three essential issues.

First, the legislation must exclude mandated coverage for abortion, incorporate federal policies against abortion funding and protect conscience rights. Long-standing federal laws governing other major health programs, including the Hyde Amendment, prevent federal funds from being used for abortions or to help purchase benefits packages that include abortions. But none of the bills extends this policy to the new health programs.

Additionally, the legislation should not force people to pay for another's abortion as a condition for receiving the health care policy of their choice. Michigan voters have soundly rejected taxpayer-funded abortions, as has an overwhelming majority of the American public.

U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak, a Menominee Democrat, must be commended for bucking the prevailing pro-choice ideology within his party, and for bringing together nearly 200 congressional Democrats and Republicans who oppose taxpayer-funded abortions.

Second, the legislation should make quality health care affordable and accessible to everyone, particularly those who are vulnerable and those who live at or near the poverty level. The ultimate test of reform is whether it helps those without adequate coverage. The affordability provisions in the Senate Finance Committee plan would impose financial burdens on low-income and moderate-income families, as well as those with significant and chronic illnesses. Some families living just above the federal poverty line could face out-of-pocket expenses that approach 25% of their income.

Third, reform must ensure that legal immigrants have equitable access to comprehensive, affordable and timely health care coverage. Legal immigrants work hard and pay taxes. Leaving them outside of a reformed system is both unfair and unwise. Several measures can address this problem, including making legal immigrants and their families eligible for subsidies according to the same criteria applicable to citizens.

It is truly unfortunate that much-needed health care reform that protects the life, dignity and conscience rights of all could slip away because of failure to remedy these serious problems.

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