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A Moral Case for Health Care Reform

by John Gehring



If you watch enough cable news you would think the fight over

health care reform has been reduced to protestors screaming about socialism, "death panels" and the evils of government. A new campaign, organized by Christian, Jewish and Muslim organizations united behind health care reform as a moral imperative, offers a stark contrast to the anger and misinformation distorting this critical debate.

Our coalition, 40 Days for Health Reform, hosted a national conference call with President Obama last week that featured religious leaders and engaged citizens sharing painful stories from the front lines of a broken health care system. One hundred and forty thousand citizens participated. Instead of shouting and demagoguery, there was thoughtful reflection, civil dialogue and factual analysis. Ministers and rabbis spoke about values that transcend partisan politics or narrow ideologies.

A Muslim-American neurologist expressed frustration with insurance companies denying coverage to those in desperate need of treatment. A 15-year-old Catholic with scoliosis talked about how her family is going without medical care because they lost Medicaid coverage. A Christian minister spoke of a parishioner without insurance whose cancer remained undiagnosed until it was too late.

These powerful testimonies remind us that health care reform is not an abstract issue. Each day in our congregations and communities we see needless suffering because quality health care is not available to all. This is a grave injustice. The faith community refuses to concede the debate to talk-radio pundits, Washington insiders or special interests defending the status quo.

We will not be satisfied until all Americans have access to quality and affordable health care. 40 Days for Health Reform includes more than 30 denominations and religious organizations that represent Americans across race, region and political affiliation. The campaign includes a national TV ad on CNN, prayer vigils, sermon weekends and visits with key members of Congress. This next month will be critical as Congress tackles several reform proposals. Each day 14 thousand Americans lose their health insurance and working families struggle to pay medical bills. Comprehensive reform can't wait any longer. As Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. once preached, we believe in the "fierce urgency of now."

At the heart of complicated legislative battles over health care are profound moral and ethical questions. Even if we are satisfied with our own health care, what responsibility do we have as a society to make sure the system works for everyone? How do we balance individual interests with policies that best serve the common good? While specific solutions to a 21st century health-care crisis can't be found in the Bible, Koran or the Torah, our faith traditions offer timeless values about human dignity, compassion and loving our neighbors as ourselves. People of goodwill can disagree over the most effective ways to ensure reform. But we must not waver from this core principle: health care is a human right, not a privilege.

The faith community also has an important responsibility to correct those bearing false witness in this debate. Fears that seniors will be denied end-of-life care or doctors will be forced to perform abortions against their ethical principles are gross distortions perpetuated by ideologues more interested in handing the Obama administration a political defeat than ensuring all Americans have quality health care.

There are longstanding policies that prohibit federal taxpayer funding of abortions and sensible conscience protections for health care providers. Retaining these policies is critical to achieving the broad consensus necessary for health care reform. In contrast to outrageous claims about "death panels", a provision in the House legislation would allow Medicare to pay doctors for voluntary counseling sessions with patients that include discussions about living wills and hospice care. The Catholic Health Association has stated the provision would not encourage euthanasia, and a diverse range of groups including The National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization, the American Medical Association and the AARP support it.

Faith-based movements have always inspired our nation to live up to its highest ideals. We know that justice and change never come easily. Again, people of faith are on the march, united in the belief that hope is more powerful than fear.

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