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Health care is a fundamental right

by Henry J. Amoroso



Health care advocates in California (CNS photo)

For those of us on the front lines of Catholic health care delivery, health care is everyone's right as surely as the right to breathe and the right to eat. It is why we so strongly believe healthcare reform is necessary now.

And while not every American believes health care is a right, no righteous person would deny emergency medical care to anyone needing it. It is this contradiction that is resulting in one of the most politically controversial fights in our nation's history.

How we pay for care, how we provide access to care, and how we hold down costs are the central questions facing President Obama and the Congress with healthcare reform. Caught in the middle are real people facing real problems trying to get the care they so badly need.

In 2008, 46.3 million people, including 9 million children, lacked health care insurance. President Obama recently said another 6 million Americans lost their health insurance during the downturn in the economy.

Sixty-two percent of all bankruptcies are due to medical bills and most of these people have health insurance.

St. Vincent's, founded as the first Catholic hospital in New York City 160 years ago, is New York City's only Catholic acute care hospital. As Catholics we embrace the uninsured, the working poor and the middle class, but must also fulfill our fiduciary duties to pay our bills. But we also know the burdens and sorrows of those who use the emergency room as their primary venue for health care and understand the impact of crowded emergency rooms on insured people who must wait hours for emergency care. Access to quality and affordable healthcare for everyone is the fundamental Catholic position. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops identified key principles within any healthcare reform legislation including:

- access for all with a special concern for the poor and inclusion of legal immigrants.
- a truly universal health policy with respect for human life and dignity,
- pursuing the common good and preserving pluralism including freedom of conscience and variety of options, and
- restraining costs and applying them equitably across the spectrum of payers.

These are fairly modest requirements. If the Congress does not support President Obama on these fundamental principles, support will be lost from a major constituency.

We Catholics bring both strong convictions and substantial everyday experience to the issue of health care. Catholic religious sisters have created one of the largest health care systems in the U.S. Catholic health institutions have been leaders in not only acute care and emergency medicine, but also behavioral health care, home health, free screenings, and many other services that are uniquely provided to the people in our community.

Today one out of six patients in our country is cared for in one of the 624 Catholic hospitals, which hospitals receive 17 million emergency room visits and 5.5 million annual admissions. These hospitals provide 93 million annual outpatient visits.

Still, more needs to be done to provide this level of care to everyone. It is clear that hospitals and the private sector cannot solve the health care crisis on their own. The federal government has a critical role to play, along with personal responsibility of every American.

We need to maximize insurance coverage for the uninsured. We also need to minimize arbitrary and damaging cuts to Medicare and Medicaid, by seeking ways to drive down expenses that increase the costs of operations. Such initiatives would, include medical malpractice reform, payer and managed care reform, and reduced expenditures for pharmaceuticals and devices.

While some political leaders have advocated for limited health care reform or a barebones "safety net" for the poor, the wiser choice is comprehensive health care coverage that emphasizes prevention, wellness and health care education. Through these efforts, we can help make the country healthier, while holding down costs and providing true access to quality medical care.

We have an obligation to provide health care to those who need it and not just those with insurance. Meaningful and vital health care reform will provide this right to all Americans, including the uninsured, the working poor, and the middle class.

The writer is President and Chief Executive Officer of Saint Vincent Catholic Medical Centers in New York City.

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