OTHER OPINION

Church Hospitals Draw Line On Abortion

One casualty of the debate in the Connecticut General Assembly on care for victims of sexual assault was truth. Leading up to the passage of the bill, the bishops of Connecticut were portrayed as being opposed to contraception for victims of sexual assault. Nothing could be further from the truth.

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Catholic health care is guided by the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services. Directive 36 deals with "compassionate and understanding care" that must be given to victims of sexual assault. It states clearly that "she may be treated with medication that would prevent ovulation ... or fertilization." Catholic hospitals have always provided "emergency contraception."

Then what was the controversy all about? The church is opposed to the direct taking of innocent human life. This takes us to another provision of Directive 36: "It is not permissible to initiate or to recommend treatments that have as their purpose or direct effect the ... interference with the implantation of [an embryo]."

In their hospitals, bishops allow contraception for victims, but not abortion. Should a child be conceived, they want to avoid there being two victims of violence, the woman and the child.

One and the same medication (Plan B) given to the woman can have two different effects. High doses of the drug can either (1) prevent ovulation or (2) prevent the implantation in the womb of a new life. At the admission of the victim, evidence and bodily fluids are collected for analysis to provide the best treatment possible.

Again, the Catholic Church permits the use of medication to prevent fertilization. A simple test on the fluids collected will tell doctors whether the medication they are considering administering will have its desired effect. If ovulation has already occurred, the drug will not have its anti-ovulation effect. Why, medically speaking, would one even administer a drug before determining with a simple test whether the drug will have the desired effect?

This new Connecticut legislation forbids the administration of a simple test to guide the physician in the treatment of the victim. Doctors should be objecting to such legislation since it could prevent them from acting in accord with their best medical judgment.

The debate surrounding this legislation was not over emergency contraception. That had already been permitted in Catholic hospitals. The debate was about abortion. That is the truth of the matter, even if the proponents of the Plan B legislation did not want to use that language.

The proponents of Plan B wanted the drug administered regardless of the effects it might have. This is something the Catholic bishops could not allow. The supporters of the bill offered what was supposed to be a compromise: "Look, let a third party who is not an employee of the hospital come in and give the drug, which may cause an abortion." The bishops of Connecticut concluded it would be wrong for a Catholic hospital to help a third party do what the Catholic hospital itself considered immoral. Is this so difficult to understand?

The issue now is whether the state will force Catholic hospitals to help third parties do what the hospitals cannot in good conscience do.

During the debate, the bishops of Connecticut were portrayed as being out of step with the rest of the church. It was maintained that the bishops of several states did not object to the law requiring the administration of the drug with no testing as to the effect it would have. That simply is not true. The bishops of every state but New York fought the sort of law that is being advanced in the Connecticut legislature. New York, for some reason, was the only state where Catholic lobbyists had no objection to such a law.

Despite the appearance of compromise, it was the Connecticut legislature that showed itself to be inflexible. Colorado recently passed such a law and provided conscience and religious exemptions. The legislators of Connecticut might learn some tolerance from those of Colorado.

In truth, the entire debate was just another round in the endless debate in this country on the direct taking of innocent human life. The issue was not contraception. It was, once again, abortion.

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