

Bishop Mark W. Holmerud and Bishop John T. Steinbock: Congress must reform health care now

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As Congress debates the final version of health care reform in America, our representatives must remember the central teaching of the Bible and the world's major religions; we are our brother's keeper, called to protect the life and dignity of all.

Jesus lived this, reaching out to all people, especially the needy, as in Matthew 25, where he identifies with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger and the sick. This is our moral compass. We pursue justice for the vulnerable and the most needy because it is right.

In providing health care, we have shifted from this fundamental principle. Our current broken system allows profit and economic status to define who lives and who dies, who gets that life-saving procedure or drug and who does not, who gets preventive care and who goes to the emergency room with a life-threatening condition.

Working families drop coverage they cannot afford, risking their lives and their children's lives. The elderly cut pills in half because they cannot afford to renew their prescriptions. Small business and nonprofits -- even churches -- are forced to choose between viability and protecting employees.

Those who have health coverage pay too high a price. Middle-class families have seen wage increases disappear as businesses pass on rising health care costs to employees.

Rising taxes and premiums prop up a public system groaning under the weight of too many uninsured. Increasingly companies purge their rolls of the most ill and cap services. We are morally bound to prioritize the health of families over the wealth of a few, and stop rationing care based on who can pay.

In this Congressional district alone, there are an estimated 288,000 uninsured (the nation's second highest rate) with many more under-insured, living dangerously close to the edge. Last year, we lost \$123 million in uncompensated care revenue, 1,180 families went bankrupt due to medical bills (75% of them had insurance), 9,200 small businesses struggled with unaffordable health care costs and 4,200 seniors on Medicare fell into the doughnut hole for prescription drugs.

Health care reform is a matter of life and death and central to recovery for our community.

In our country, where 45,000 die every year from lack of health insurance and millions more are under-insured, the human cost for delay or half measures is too high. One thing is certain -- we simply cannot afford to do nothing.

Our representatives must provide moral leadership in creating a truly universal health care system that respects human life and dignity from the moment of conception to natural death, and accessibility to all, with a special concern for the poor and inclusion of legal immigrants.

Reform legislation must respect the conscience rights of health care providers, ensuring that neither they nor health care entities are forced to participate in procedures to which they morally object. Nor should coverage for abortion be mandated.

The common good must be pursued with protections for pluralism, and a variety of options. If all Americans are required to buy health insurance, there must be affordable choices with strong mechanisms for restraining costs, providing families with the opportunity and the responsibility for preventative care and lower employer costs.

Insurance companies need to be held accountable for consumer protections. Everyone -- employers, the government, individuals and insurance companies -- need to share the responsibility of making our system just.

Every moment we delay, another person dies, another family goes bankrupt, another loved one weeps. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. reminds us, "Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane."

Now is the time for us to aim for our highest values not our basest fears. We call on Congress to delay justice no longer and pass a bill that provides quality, affordable health care for all Americans -- now.