

**Stop the New Attack on Conscience Rights**

**By Richard M. Doerflinger**

Americans have expressed many different views about contraception and sterilization. But just about everyone has been able to agree on one thing: Government should not force anyone to act in accord with someone else's view rather than his or her own.

That consensus may have ended August 1, when the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) announced it will require virtually all private health plans in the U.S. to cover the full range of contraceptive drugs and devices and sterilization procedures, as well as "education and counseling for all women with reproductive capacity" to promote these. HHS will require this under the new health care reform law's mandate for covering "preventive services" without co-pays or out-of-pocket expenses. Even the great majority of religious organizations must comply, or stop providing health coverage.

Fortunately HHS is allowing public comment on its decision until September 30. All concerned about government's respect for freedom of conscience need to raise their voices now.

The Catholic bishops' conference has made it easy to do so by visiting the web page [www.usccb.org/conscience](http://www.usccb.org/conscience). Visitors can send a prepared e-mail message to HHS, add their own personal comments as they wish, and learn more about the issue. The prepared message and related materials focus on three points:

1. **Pregnancy not a disease:** The idea behind "preventive services" is to invest in making sure that dangerous illnesses are avoided in the first place, or detected very early, so we don't need more risky and expensive curative treatments later. Almost all congressional discussion of "preventive services for women," for example, was about preventing breast cancer. Pregnancy simply does not belong on this list of diseases – it is the healthy, natural condition by which each of us came into the world. And if government is committed to preventing pregnancy now, because it is the kind of condition that otherwise needs a "cure," the stage is set for mandated abortion coverage. Prescription contraceptives also pose their own health problems, including an increased risk of stroke, AIDS and some cancers.

**2. Covering abortion drugs:** The drift from contraception to abortion is even more apparent in HHS's insistence on covering all drugs approved by the FDA for contraception. Some FDA-approved "emergency contraceptives" can work by interfering with an embryo's ability to implant in the mother's womb, ensuring the death of a newly conceived human being – and that is an abortion in Catholic teaching. One such drug, "Ella," a close analogue to the abortion drug RU-486, could induce abortions well after implantation.

**3. Suppressing freedom of religion:** Federal law has always left Catholic organizations free to offer health coverage in accord with their moral and religious convictions – whether that coverage is offered to employees, students in Catholic colleges, or the general public. The religious exemption in the new HHS rule addresses only the first of these three situations, and does that very badly. To provide a Catholic health plan even to its own employees, a Catholic organization must focus on teaching religious doctrine, fire its non-Catholic employees, and refuse to provide health care and other life-affirming services to any but fellow Catholics. Jesus himself, who helped and healed people of various faiths, would not be "religious enough" to qualify for this bizarrely narrow exception.

For these reasons the current HHS mandate for contraceptive coverage should not be implemented. Above all, any policy on this subject should have no involvement in abortion or in violating religious freedom. Working together we may get the federal government to realize this.

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Mr. Doerflinger is Associate Director of the Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. Please visit [www.usccb.org/conscience](http://www.usccb.org/conscience) to learn more about the bishops' campaign to protect conscience rights.