

Abortion has no place in health care bill, bishops' spokeswoman says

WASHINGTON – The president of Planned Parenthood confuses authentic health care with access to abortion and all forms of artificial contraception, said Deirdre A. McQuade, assistant director for policy and communications in the U.S. bishops' Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities.

Responding to a column by Cecile Richards, president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, that appeared Aug. 18 on the Huffington Post Web site, McQuade said health care reform pending in Congress should provide people with access to basic health care, not services that harm human life.

"Fundamentally, abortion is not health care," McQuade told Catholic News Service. "It should not be considered fundamental in any way to any health care reform at the federal or state level.

"She's shifting the language around to say universal health care means coverage of every single legal medical procedure. Nobody's proposing that," McQuade said.

The bishops have called for any health care legislative measure to remain "abortion neutral," that is, that existing laws and policies governing abortion and abortion funding be preserved. U.S. law does not allow the use of government funds for most abortions.

Richards challenged the bishops' position, saying that their view of universal health coverage would make women "second-class citizens" because they oppose the inclusion of abortion coverage in health care reform legislation.

"Does anyone else see the irony in the U.S. bishops wanting to define universal health care as covering everything except for what they don't support?" Richards wrote in response to an Aug. 17 story in U.S. News & World Report that outlined the bishops' position.

"Under this theory, I suppose women are supposed to wait and see just exactly how

the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops comes down on a variety of health needs to understand what in fact will be considered universal,” she said.

Richards contended that access to abortion and contraception remain a fundamental health care need and be included in any health care reform measure adopted by Congress.

“The danger, of course, is not simply that the bishops are pushing to erode decades of legal access to contraception and abortion in American,” Richards wrote.

The Planned Parenthood official also claimed the bishops’ “hard-line opposition to women’s rights” endangers women around the world who need access to universal health care.

“The effort to criminalize access to safe abortion endangers most women in the developing world, the very women that you would think the bishops would be concerned about,” she wrote.

McQuade said the bishops’ position has been consistent throughout the health care debate since Congress began tackling the issue in June.

“The bishops have a very creative and kind of politically, I would say, beautiful and complex position which is that they’re for authentic reform of health care, for universal coverage that is truly universal,” McQuade explained. “(They’ve) got the most inclusive vision possible in that they call for authentic care of the unborn all the way through natural death.

“The bishops’ vision is to authentically serve, especially those who are least served among us, to put them first. Who’s more vulnerable than the unborn?” she said.

McQuade also refuted Richards’ position that comprehensive access to artificial contraception would reduce unwanted pregnancies and lead to fewer abortions. “Greater access to contraception has never been shown to decrease pregnancy rates or abortion,” she said.