

Archbishop O'Brien asks Sarbanes to protect conscience rights

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien called on Maryland Democratic Congressman John Sarbanes to protect the conscience rights of medical professionals as he and other lawmakers consider health care reform.

In a July 29 letter, Archbishop O'Brien urged Sarbanes to support amendments to America's Affordable Health Choices Act (HR 3200) that would "ensure this legislation protects conscience rights and does not serve as a vehicle to advance abortion mandates or federal funding of abortion."

Sarbanes serves on the House Energy and Commerce Committee that is considering the bill. The amendments supported by the archbishop were offered by Michigan Democratic Congressman Bart Stupak and Pennsylvania Republican Congressman Joseph Pitts.

"The Catholic community has long supported health care reform that will ensure all citizens, regardless of their income or medical condition, have access to quality, life-affirming care," Archbishop O'Brien said. "This goal is too important to allow it to become mired in needless controversy regarding the issue of abortion."

In a separate July 29 letter to all committee members, Philadelphia Cardinal Justin Rigali noted that federal law has long excluded most abortions from federal employees' health benefits plans and places no requirement for private plans to provide abortion. Most private plans do not cover elective abortions.

Cardinal Rigali pointed out that HR 3200 gives power to the Secretary of Health and Human Services to make abortion a basic or essential benefit in all health plans.

"This would be a radical change," said Cardinal Rigali, chairman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' committee on pro-life activities.

Cardinal Rigali warned that provisions in the bill such as those requiring timely access to all benefits covered by qualified health plans "could be used by courts to

override and invalidate state laws regulation abortion, such as laws to ensure women's safety and informed consent and to promote parental involvement when minors consider abortion."

The cardinal pointed out that President Barack Obama recently said he would do nothing to weaken federal laws that protect conscience rights. He urged Congress to make the same pledge.