

Ethics code comes to posh London hospital

LONDON - A revised code of ethics will prevent doctors from providing contraceptives and abortion referrals at a London Catholic hospital popular with celebrity mothers.

The finalized code, which is expected to be passed by the hospital board May 16, will encompass all staff and resident practitioners at the Hospital of St. John and St. Elizabeth.

A draft of the code says that services will not be provided if they conflict with Catholic teaching regarding the value of life or sexual ethics. This includes the provision of the morning-after pill, amniocentesis to detect Down syndrome and in vitro fertilization.

Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor of Westminster ordered the code to be revised after doctors admitted to prescribing the morning-after pill and referring women for abortions at other hospitals.

The cardinal wrote a letter in March 2006 to Robin Bridgeman, chairman of the hospital, that said a newly revised code would be produced and that the hospital would have to abide by it.

"There must be clarity that the hospital, being a Catholic hospital with a distinct vision of what is truly in the interests of human persons, cannot offer its patients, non-Catholic or Catholic, the whole range of services routinely accepted by many in modern secular society as being in a patient's best interest," said the letter.

Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor appointed Auxiliary Bishop George Stack of Westminster to the hospital's ethics committee to ensure that Catholic teaching was upheld in the new code. The cardinal also discussed the matter with Pope Benedict XVI in 2005 when the pope, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Sources told Catholic News Serve that some executives may oppose the code because they claim it could cost the hospital revenue if general practitioners, who pay to use the hospital site, chose to move elsewhere rather than abide by the restrictions.

Nicolas Bellord, secretary of the Restituta Group, which has campaigned to keep the Catholic identity of the hospital, said some executives would view the code as unworkable.

Bellord noted in the April/May edition of the group's bulletin that a truly Catholic hospital "would be a very marketable concept to those ... who are attracted by a hospital where there is no deliberate destruction of human life from conception to natural death."

The private hospital was founded in 1856 and formerly was run by the Sisters of Mercy. Cardinal George Basil Hume of Westminster died of cancer there in June 1999.

Its maternity unit has become popular with celebrities living in the nearby areas of St. John's Wood, Hampstead and Primrose Hill.

Described in fashion magazines as the "poshest place to push," the hospital has a clientele of A-list celebrities that includes actresses Cate Blanchett and Emma Thompson and models Kate Moss and Heather Mills-McCartney.

The government revealed in the House of Commons last year that the hospital also

had become a center for certain sex-change operations.