

Human rights attorney sounds clarion call on life issues

Warning that human life is being devalued at every level, a top human rights attorney from California urged Baltimore health care professionals to support conscience clauses that will help protect their right to uphold the sanctity of life.

Speaking at the second-annual Symposium for Catholic Medical Professionals March 6, Wesley Smith said trends such as embryonic stem-cell research, assisted suicide and efforts to redefine death all are grounded in the notion that society must avoid suffering at all costs.

“If that’s the case, we will have a completely different kind of society,” said Smith, speaking at St. Agnes Hospital in Baltimore. “The focus can turn into eliminating the sufferer.”

Smith, who writes a popular blog on bioethics called “Secondhand Smoke,” said medicine is running the risk of become utilitarian.

“The purpose of medicine is no longer about healing,” he said, “but to facilitate lifestyle choices. Utilitarianism pushes the idea that some lives have better value than others.”

Smith pointed to a study that showed only 13 percent of doctors take the Hippocratic Oath - an ancient practice that includes pledges to do no harm, to never perform abortions and to refrain from giving lethal drugs to someone who asks for it. Taking the oath provides a protection to patients - especially those who are most vulnerable, Smith said.

“We reject those values at our own risk,” he said.

Threats on life are making their way into the popular culture through professional journals, Smith said. He highlighted a 2003 proposal in *Critical Care Medicine* that argued in favor of allowing those near death to donate their organs before being declared dead. There are movements around the world promoting assisted suicide, he said. Similarly, there are efforts to require doctors to perform or refer for abortion.

“What is coming along in the next 10 years is whether the people in this room will be allowed to stay in medicine,” Smith said, reiterating the importance of passing conscience protection laws.

Dr. F. Michael Gloth, associate professor of medicine at The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore, said many professionals have a “false sense we can provide care or a cure well beyond our grasp.”

Father Michael A. DeAscanis, a moral theologian and associate pastor of Glen Burnie’s Church of the Crucifixion and Church of the Good Shepherd, reminded participants that the soul is the basis of human dignity and that God created men and women in his image.

“Suffering can be redemptive,” Father DeAscanis said. “It has meaning. Christ’s suffering made it possible for us to go to heaven.”

The symposium was hosted by Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien and also featured a talk by Dr. Marie Hilliard of the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia.