

MCC concerned about bill that could promote suicide

After receiving a terminal diagnosis, the last thing someone needs is counseling from groups that promote suicide, Nancy Paltell said.

Yet that's exactly what the Catholic lobbyist fears will happen if a bill now under consideration in the House of Delegates becomes law.

Sponsored by Howard County Del. Elizabeth Bobo (D) and Montgomery County Del. Roger Manno (D), House Bill 30 would require health care providers to give counseling or refer terminal patients to hospice providers or other organizations that specialize in terminal condition case management and consultation.

"The bill says counseling can only be about legal options," said Ms. Paltell, associate director for respect for life with the Maryland Catholic Conference.

"But it's not illegal to encourage someone to commit suicide. We're afraid that people will prey on patients at the most vulnerable times in their lives."

Ms. Paltell noted that the language of the Maryland bill is almost identical to a similar law in California that was supported by Compassion and Choices, the former Hemlock Society that promotes suicide.

"If the goal is to make sure everyone knows about hospice options, then why not put in a separate bill that says that a physician shall ensure that a discussion ensues with a patient about hospice care," Ms. Paltell said. "Why do we need all this other stuff in the bill?"

Dr. Louis Breschi, president of the Catholic Medical Association, is concerned that the government is trying to mandate how physicians practice medicine.

"We can't practice medicine in a cookbook fashion," he said. "You can't pass one law that covers everyone."

Dr. Breschi said the bill "demeans" doctors who are in the service of their patients.

Dr. Breschi and Ms. Paltell testified against the bill during a Jan. 27 hearing in the House Health and Government Operations Committee.