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Madison diocese health insurance policy out of touch

Mike Sweitzer-Beckman | Aug. 20, 2010

I wasn't necessarily shocked when I saw the latest article about Bishop Robert Morlino and the diocese of Madison by Doug Erickson in the *Wisconsin State Journal*, titled "Madison diocese offers birth control insurance, but warns employees not to use it." In brief, Wisconsin state law requires all employers to offer birth control as a benefit to employees who are in their health insurance plans. The diocese tried to avoid this law by becoming self-insured, but that proved too costly. So while it is compelled to offer the benefit the diocese is saying that termination could come to any employee who uses it.

After two years of living in this diocese under the reign of Bishop Morlino not much shocks me anymore. My first reaction was: "I'm glad that my employer doesn't offer me a benefit that if I use I would get fired." After much discussion with Catholics, including some employees of the diocese and some secular employers, I?ve come up with three reasons why I think this new "no-use rule" is off-base ? and possibly just plain wrong.

1. The rule violates privacy.
   The only way that the diocese is going to be able to enforce this rule is if an employee comes out and admits that a birth control prescription was obtained under the diocesan health insurance plan. Thankfully, the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) is in place and the diocese can't go digging into its employees health records.

   I don't quite understand what circumstances would lead an employee to talk about her birth control use in the office, but this rule does force employees to add a new level of cloudiness to their personal and professional lives. If an employee slips and does talk about her personal decision at work, some sort of counseling or hearing may be held for her. And if she decides using birth control is the best medical option available for her, then, according to Brent King ? the communications guru of the diocese ? she can be fired.

   From observing the aftermath of Ruth Kolpack's firing from her parish in Beloit, Wis., last year, I have seen that a termination is never private in a parish setting. There are too many public ties to an employee and the private will become public.

2. The rule is sexist.
   If Chris Taylor, the public policy director for Planned Parenthood of Wisconsin, is right about 95 percent of women using birth control at some point in their lives, then the diocese is going to have a lot of counseling cases on its hands

   What isn't clear is what happens to the men who are in relationships with women who use birth control medication. If a male employee's wife uses a birth control prescription obtained under the diocesan plan and somehow this comes out, will the male employee be counseled and possibly terminated? Will it be

viewed as his wife's decision? If she's not Catholic will it even matter? Will the diocese also try to counsel the spouses of its employees? It's very murky water.

3. The rule is out of touch with the modern world.
   Perhaps fewer Catholic women use birth control than Planned Parenthood's 95 percent figure, but I'm sure in this modern world easily more than half of Catholic women do. The Pew Forum reports that U.S. Catholics overwhelmingly reject the Vatican's teachings on birth control and that many Catholics leave the church because of this teaching. Women who opt to use birth control do so for a variety of reasons. Some are looking to have more control over the timing of having children. And for those who say that couples should try the rhythm method, the few people I?ve talked with who have committed to that method have unexpectedly gotten pregnant immediately as a result.

It should be noted that there are other reasons that women use birth control prescriptions besides controlling the timing of pregnancies. Some use it as a way to control acne. It is also used to regulate menstrual cycles. I knew an employee with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps who had to fight to allow a volunteer living to obtain a birth control prescription so that she could have less painful and irregular menstrual cycles. Hopefully the diocese would see the value in this after the counseling sessions mentioned in the article.
In the end, I hope that this rule won't be enforced too often. It would be a tragedy to hear of a female employee who is terminated even though she is a bilingual minister to immigrants. Hopefully the whole package of what an employee brings can be evaluated for the benefit of the church ? or there may not be many talented people willing to work for the church much longer.

[Mike Sweitzer-Beckman recently earned his master of divinity degree from the Jesuit School of Theology, Berkley, Calif. He lives with his wife in his hometown in Wisconsin and co-founded the blog www.youngadultcatholics-blog.com.]

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