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Pro-life official: Catholic contraceptive report misleading

Nancy Frazier O'Brien Catholic News Service | Apr. 26, 2011

WASHINGTON The U.S. bishops' pro-life spokeswoman is disputing a new report from the Guttmacher Institute that says Catholic women -- including frequent churchgoers -- are just as likely as other women to use artificial contraception.

"The way the data is presented ... is misleading in a pretty fundamental way," Deirdre McQuade, assistant director for policy and communications at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, told Catholic News Service April 21.

In a report released earlier in the month, titled "Countering Conventional Wisdom: New Evidence on Religion and Contraceptive Use," Guttmacher researchers Rachel K. Jones and Joerg Dreweke said "contraceptive use by Catholics and evangelicals, including those who frequently attend religious services, is the widespread norm, not the exception."

They said contraception "continues to be perceived as controversial among some policymakers and is opposed by the Catholic hierarchy and some other socially conservative organizations." The report said the USCCB "led the charge against" moves to include contraception as part of the mandated preventive services for women under the new health reform law.

"We are not alone as Catholics in objecting to taxpayer funding of contraceptives, some of which are abortifacient," said McQuade, who represented the USCCB at hearings held by the Institute of Medicine's Committee on Preventive Services for Women, charged with making recommendations to the Department of Health and Human Services about what should be included among mandated benefits for women.

She cited the drug ella, which is marketed as a contraceptive but acts in same way as the abortion pill RU-486 very early in pregnancy.

In addition, she said, contraception should not be included among mandated preventive services for women because "pregnancy is not a disease."

"Fertility is a sign of health," not of illness, McQuade said, adding that in a time of limited resources, the funds available to help women stay healthy should go toward "ways of preventing disease, early detection or

intervention before problems get out of control."

McQuade pointed out that the report used data from the 2006-2008 National Survey of Family Growth, which asked sexually active women ages 15-44 whether they had ever used any form of contraception other than natural family planning and found that 99 percent of them said they had. The figure for sexually active Catholic women in that age range was 98 percent.

But the statistics would not include, for example, women whose sexual partners used condoms when they were teenagers or early in their marriages "but who then came to understand the church's teachings on sexuality and stopped using them," McQuade said.

"Right from the start they are painting a discouraging picture, but netting everyone is not particularly helpful information," she added. "The report captures none of that intricacy of people coming to understand how their body works and how their future can be authentically planned" through natural family planning.

McQuade also disputed the report's characterization of certain forms of contraception -- sterilization, the pill and intrauterine devices -- as "highly effective methods" while dismissing natural family planning as a form of birth regulation.

Among couples who are "very faithful in following the rules," natural family planning results in "one to three pregnancies per 100 couples in a year, ranking it up there with other methods," she said.

McQuade said natural family planning also finds support among various people for diverse reasons -- from "radical feminists" who like it because it "respects the woman in her totality" to the environmentally conscious who see it as a "green" method that does not harm the planet to those who simply like that it is free.

Even if they once used artificial methods of contraception, people now are "shunning contraceptive use for different reasons," she said.

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