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Bishops take on health care

by Alice Popovici

BALTIMORE -- The U.S. Catholic bishops voted Nov. 14 during their fall meeting to create a permanent subcommittee on health care issues under the Committee on Doctrine, replacing a task force that had handled a variety of issues related to health care over the past three years.

The task force addressed "everything from medical moral issues to things like pastoral care," health care reform and hospital mergers, according to its chair, Bishop Kevin Rhoades of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind.

Though the work of the task force -- dealing with health care reform or mergers between hospitals -- often intersected with the work of other committees, most of it dealt with ethical and religious directives, Rhoades said, and "those directives are really the responsibility of the Committee on Doctrine."

The nine bishops who will be part of the subcommittee have not yet been selected, but Rhoades said they may include members of committees who had worked with the task force on health care in the past, such as the committees on Canonical Affairs and Pro-Life Activities.

"Health care is a very important part of the mission of the church, because it goes back to Jesus himself, who healed the sick," Rhoades said. "We have, in the U.S., over 1,400 hospitals and health care facilities, so it is extremely important that we have, I think, a permanent body in the conference regarding this area of the church's ministry."

Kathy Saile, director of domestic social development at the bishops' conference, said the bishops' overarching priorities regarding health care reform are to expand coverage to all, ensure coverage options are not limited for undocumented immigrants, and maintain prohibitions against federal funding for abortions. But a number of other issues intersect with health care, she added, among them cultural diversity and religious liberty.

?It's really related to the whole religious liberty issue,? said Rhoades, referring to some of the work the subcommittee on health care will undertake.

He said one of the items the subcommittee may deal with early on is the proposed Department of Health and Human Services mandate that would require health plans (including those Catholic employers offer their employees) to cover sterilizations and contraception -- an issue that has brought U.S. bishops, the Catholic Health Association and Catholic universities together in protest.

Catholic News Service reported that the bishops approved the new subcommittee with a 214-15 vote. Speaking before the vote, Archbishop Henry J. Mansell of Hartford, Conn., said he was ?strongly in favor? of the new subcommittee because health care is part of ?the Gospel mission of the church? and involves ?billions and billions of dollars in funding.?

?We run the risk of losing a major ministry of the church if we don't keep a close eye on health care issues,? he said.

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