

Guest column
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Health is among the most fundamental of human needs – right up there with food and shelter. Yet, in many ways we leave it pretty much to chance, to a health-care “system” that may, or may not, care for us depending on our ability to pay.

Around 47 million of our fellow citizens lack the ability to pay. That number of uninsured Americans, many of them children, represents a five percent increase since 2005. And the number of people who have health coverage that does not *adequately* protect them has also risen, to an estimated 25 million, up 60 percent from 2003. Studies show that uninsured and underinsured people are consistently sick more often, and more sick, than the rest of us. These are not just statistics; they involve great human suffering.

But besides the personal plight of the sick, the current way of providing health care damages the common good. The uninsured and underinsured burden our hospitals’ emergency rooms, driving up costs for everybody. We have the most expensive health system in the world but fail to get proportionate benefits. Too many are excluded from coverage, and according to leading indicators, the health of Americans fails to measure up to the health of people in dozens of nations – including many countries that are less “developed.”

These are among the reasons why the Catholic Church, which consistently promotes respect for human life, heartily supports health-care reform. The status quo is just too expensive, too exclusive and too inconsistent in its outcomes. It hurts almost everyone, but especially the most vulnerable.

This same respect for human life obliges the church to oppose the inclusion of abortion in any funding that is part of such reform. Promoting and protecting human life and dignity by reforming health care shouldn’t come at the expense of the lives of unborn children.

So my fellow American Catholic bishops and I propose the following for inclusion in any health-reform bill:

1. Universal health coverage that protects the life and dignity of all, especially the poor and vulnerable.
2. The exclusion of any expansion of abortion funding, mandating of abortion coverage, or endangering the conscience rights of health-care providers and religious institutions.
3. Effective measures to safeguard the health of immigrants, their children and all of society.

Some readers, including some Catholics, may ask why a bishop should concern himself with a “secular” issue such as health reform. But caring for others was one Jesus’ principal commandments, and Catholics and other Christians have always been involved in providing care. The Sisters of Mercy, for example, established Mercy Hospital in Des Moines in 1893. It’s the longest continually operating hospital in the state and provides care to people of all faiths.

Indeed, wrote Bishop William Murphy of the Diocese of Rockville Center in New York in a recent letter to Congress, health care is not just another issue for the church. It is “a fundamental issue of human life and dignity,” and a “critical component of the Catholic Church’s ministry.”