



Statement of the Catholic Bishops of Florida on Access to Health Care

Our nation, despite concerns over economic growth, remains one of the wealthiest in the world. Still, 41 million people – and almost 3 million in Florida alone – lack health insurance and access to adequate healthcare services. As the Legislature debates malpractice reform, and works to relieve the crisis of access to health care, we call attention to the plight of the uninsured. We raise two questions: Is an injustice done to those who do not have adequate access to health care? Is health care a right? The Church's answer is clear: there is a right to healthcare, and it is a basic right to all human beings.

Pope John XXIII's teaching in *Pacem in Terris* provides a clear foundation. He begins by listing the basic rights of human beings and their foundation in human dignity: "every (person) has the right to life, bodily integrity, and to the means which are necessary and suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care and finally the necessary social services."¹

The Bishops of the United States affirmed this in the 1981 Pastoral Letter on *Health and Health Care*. It states that "access to that health care which is necessary and suitable to for the proper development and maintenance of life must be provided for all people, regardless of economic, social or legal status. Special attention should be given to meeting the health needs of the poor."²

More recently, Pope John Paul II expressed that "the essential purpose of health care is to promote and safeguard the well-being of those who need it, that medical research and practice must always be tied to ethical imperatives, that the weak and those who seem unproductive to the eyes of a consumer society have an inviolable dignity that must always be respected, and that health care should be available as a right to all people without exception."³

The Gospel compels identification with the poor and suffering. More than three out of four persons without health insurance, and thus without ready access to health care, are considered the "working poor."⁴ Our continuing advocacy for the poor is not based on the idea that they are more virtuous than the strong or the wealthy; it is simply based on their evident need. Scriptures emphasize to us that God's concern is not so much a matter of "worthiness" but need. Scriptures emphasize to us that God's concern is not so much a matter of "worthiness" but need. All is grace and gift from God.

All of us are called to be wise and generous stewards of our lives and gifts. "Life and physical health are precious gifts entrusted to us by God. We must take reasonable care of them, taking into account the needs of others and the common good."⁵ Those of us with wealth or power are endowed with these to use for those in need. Society has the obligation to provide the means for all persons to strive to attain good health.

Health care providers – physicians, hospitals, nursing homes, hospices, other professionals and organizations – are under a variety of stressors impacting the care of the poor. Rising operational costs, especially those resulting from increased liability are diverting more and more resources. Those who pay for care – governments, employers and insurance companies – seek the lowest costs for the care of those entrusted to them. Research has developed new drugs and treatments, which make care for some of us much better. Meanwhile, many people continue to lack adequate care.

The Church has a long and proud tradition of caring for the poor and sick in Florida, dating back to the Daughters of Charity, who with a group of interested Pensacola citizens established Sacred Heart Hospital in 1915. We give great thanks for the contributions of the religious communities who have served this state through sponsored health ministries, including the Franciscan Sisters of Allegany, the Sisters of St. Joseph of St. Augustine, the Sisters of Mercy, the Congregation of Bon Secours and the Carmelite Sisters of the Aged and Infirm.

The health ministries of the Church have historically confronted adversity in caring for those in need. Challenges they face today are no less daunting. Florida's Catholic hospitals last year directed in excess of \$120 million to care of the poor. This figure represents traditional charity care, services for which they receive no revenue, and the losses incurred through participation in government-sponsored health plans.

We also applaud the many physicians who extend their care to the poor and underinsured who cannot cover the true costs of their care. We recognize the fine service provided by the network of hospitals and health organizations that comprise our health care safety net, which is truly challenged in today's environment.

As a society, we have tended to view health care services as a "commodity," accessible to most people, rather than as a right to which all should have access. We often direct our health resources in ways that make care for some exceptional and at times excessive, while others still lack basic care. We urge a new attitude that will insure all persons receive adequate care.

We recognize that malpractice reform is at the center of public debate at this time. A balance must be struck allowing access to the courts, fair discipline, quality improvements and concern for access to care. Appropriate remedies must be provided to those who are harmed in receiving care, but justice demands that awards not be exorbitant, and that they do not limit society's ability to care for all in need.

We ask our state senators and representatives to craft policies that will ensure access to health services for all Floridians. It is not our task to define specific models, but we urge and pledge our support for health policy in our state that promotes respect for and defense of the dignity of every human person, at every stage of development, beginning with the weakest and poorest.

We recall that "what we do to the least of our brothers and sisters," we do to and for the Lord (Mt. 25:40). We eagerly solicit the support of our Catholic faithful, policy makers, societies, health organizations, and all people of good will in this effort. May God bless efforts to ensure access to health services for all people in our State.

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Bishop Norbert M. Dorsey, CP
Diocese of Orlando

Bishop Victor Galeone
Diocese of St. Augustine

Bishop Thomas G. Wenski
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¹ Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*. April 11, 1963, #11

² *Health and Health Care: A Pastoral Letter of the American Bishops*. (Washington, DC: US Catholic Conference, November 19, 1981, Part V, 17-18)

³ Pope John Paul II, *Letter to the President of the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Workers, 9th World Day of the Sick*, Sydney, Australia, February 11, 2001

⁴ "Health Insurance: Characteristics and Trends in the Uninsured Population." (March 13, 2001), General Accounting Office testimony. GAO-01-507T, www.gao.gov.

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church, Second Edition*, 1997, No 2288.