

RELIGIOUS AMERICANS SPEAK OUT

Pro-Choice

Hospital Mergers: The Hidden Crisis

Across the United States, secular community hospitals are merging with religiously-sponsored hospitals or health systems to relieve financial stress. The merger of medical facilities may make economic sense when more cost-effective services are provided. But mergers can have a harmful impact on access to health care when the religious hospital imposes religious restrictions on the secular hospital. In more than 34 states, mergers of religious and community hospitals have curtailed or eliminated comprehensive reproductive health care services, including abortion services. "Merger mania" has created a hidden crisis in reproductive health care.

Catholic Directives Ban Reproductive Services

While Baptist, Adventist, and other religiously-affiliated hospitals may have policies to restrict certain reproductive health services, they have considerable local autonomy as to what services are provided. But all Roman Catholic health care systems and hospitals are governed by a single philosophy, laid out in the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* and issued by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. These directives forbid hospitals to provide contraception of all kinds, fertility treatments, voluntary sterilization, AIDS prevention information, and abortions. Even emergency contraception in the case of rape can be refused.

Nearly 18 percent of all hospitals and 20 percent of all hospital beds in health systems are owned or controlled by the Catholic Church, according to Catholics for Choice, a member of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. Thus, the Catholic health care system has a significant medical responsibility to millions of Americans.

A Victory for Health Care in Arizona

In 2009, in rural Southeastern Arizona, Sierra Vista Regional Health Center joined Carondelet Health Network, a Catholic health system that prohibits some reproductive health services. The affiliation required the secular hospital to follow the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, curtailing the provision of key reproductive health services at a facility that is the sole provider of hospital care for a rural three-county region near the border with Mexico.

A grassroots group, Cochise Citizens for Patients' Rights, opposed the elimination of services and took action, picketing the hospital, staging rallies and running newspaper ads. The group filed a complaint with the state attorney general stating that the affiliation changed the mission of the secular hospital. One obstetrician was forced to send a patient 80 miles away to a hospital in Tucson for a pregnancy termination after she miscarried one of two 15-week twins at home and it was clear the remaining twin could not survive. Women reported they were refused voluntary tubal ligations at the time of cesarean section deliveries at the hospital.



1413 K STREET, NW
14TH FLOOR
WASHINGTON, DC 20005
202.628.7700

On April 29, 2011, Sierra Vista Regional Health Center announced it had ended its trial affiliation with Carondelet Health Network.

Religious Freedom at Stake

Member organizations of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice have adopted official statements of concern about the erosion of reproductive health services due to mergers involving a Catholic hospital or health system.

The Presbyterian Church (USA) directed its Stated Clerk to convey its concerns about hospital mergers and their impact on health care to the Roman Catholic Church via the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, “encouraging the search together for creative solutions that will preserve religious freedom, religious traditions, and access to quality comprehensive health care.”

The United Methodist Church, saying “a crisis in health care is occurring in communities across the United States because of the ever-increasing number of hospital mergers,” directed its General Board of Church and Society and Women’s Division to provide information about the problem. The UMC 2008 statement says “such mergers often put the availability of AIDS prevention information, fertility services, artificial insemination, tubal ligations, vasectomies, condom distribution, contraceptive medication and devices, ‘morning after’ pills, and abortion services at risk.” The impact is greatest in poor communities.

As long as a community has both religiously-affiliated hospitals and secular hospitals, patients of all faiths, and those who are non-religious, have a choice about the health care services they want. But when a provider with restrictive religious rules dominates most or all health care services in one market, patients are in danger of losing their access to the full

range of health services—regardless of their religious affiliation.

What You Can Do in Your Community

Before a Merger Has Been Proposed

- **Learn** about the health care available in your community. Do any of your local hospitals operate under restrictive religious rules?
- **Establish contacts** with hospital administrators and members of the boards of the hospitals in your community. Let them know about your concerns, and keep in contact with them.

After a Merger Has Been Proposed

- **Make alliances** with other groups that will be affected by the proposed merger.
- **Organize** a response in your community through letters, forums, press contacts, and petitions.
- **Offer creative solutions** that might preserve services. Hospitals can find ways to cooperate that allow each hospital to maintain its identity and mission while realizing operational savings. Agreements may be structured to allow the Catholic partner to be separated from services it finds objectionable.
- **Join** the Religious Coalition in monitoring hospital mergers. Pro-choice people of faith must insist that hospitals respect religious diversity and serve their entire community. Email info@rcrc.org for our guide to countering hospital mergers: “Protecting Individual Conscience in the Age of Hospital Mergers.”

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, founded in 1973, is the national organization of pro-choice people of faith, working to ensure reproductive choice through the moral power of religious communities.

Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
Phone: 202-628-7700 \ fax: 202-628-7716
Email: info@rcrc.org
Website: www.rcrc.org