

RELIGIOUS AMERICANS SPEAK OUT

Pro-Choice

Hospital Mergers: The Hidden Crisis

Since 1990, a record number of secular, community-based hospitals have affiliated with religiously-owned hospitals. The merger of medical facilities may make economic sense when more cost-effective services are provided. But mergers have another consequence 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.

While Baptist, Adventist, and other religiously-affiliated hospitals restrict certain reproductive health services, they have considerable local autonomy. The most significant religious influence on American health care delivery comes from Roman Catholic health care systems. Catholic hospitals form the nation’s largest not-for-profit health care provider, with about 600 hospitals nationwide providing 15 percent of all care. All Catholic hospitals are governed by a single philosophy, laid out in the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services and issued by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. These directives forbid hospitals to provide contraception of all kinds—a means of health care used by 34 million American women—fertility treatments, voluntary sterilization, AIDS prevention information, and abortions. Referrals to other facilities that provide these services are often denied.

Even emergency contraception in the case of rape is denied. Of 589 Catholic hospital emergency rooms surveyed by Catholics for a Free Choice, 82 percent deny emergency contraception to rape victims—and of those, almost one third refuse to provide a referral.

Religious Freedom at Stake

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. In a nation founded on religious freedom, it is fundamentally wrong for one religion to impose its beliefs on all citizens.

Reproductive Health Care Threatened

- From 1997 to 1998, the number of Catholic-operated hospitals grew by 11% while the number of secular facilities declined by 2.1%.
- Of the 127 mergers between Catholic and non-Catholic hospitals from 1990 to 1998, Catholics for a Free Choice estimates that half resulted in the elimination of all or some reproductive health services.

An Unequal Burden

The burden of restricted services falls most heavily on poor women and women in rural areas, who have additional costs, delays, and health risks in obtaining reproductive health services outside their communities. In many rural areas, the hospital is the only place within hundreds of miles where families can obtain reproductive health services. As a result of mergers since 1990, the sole hospital in 91 counties is operating under Roman Catholic health care directives. In 95 percent of those counties, only a minority of the population is Roman Catholic.

What You Can Do in Your Community

When a hospital merger or affiliation threatens reproductive health services, pro-choice people of faith must take action and make their voices heard.

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? Which local hospitals are facing financial difficulties and may be candidates for mergers? Which hospitals offer reproductive health services?
- Understand restrictive religious health care directives. Different religiously-affiliated hospitals have different limitations on reproductive health care.
- 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

- Learn about the proposed merger, including what the religious terms are and how the religious sponsors and authorities will be represented on the merged hospital board.
- Make alliances with other groups of people who will be affected by the proposed merger. Religious health care directives affect a wide range of services, including abortion, end-of-life health care, AIDS prevention information, and infertility treatment.
- Organize a response in your community. Use contacts to share your views behind-the-scenes. Raise public awareness through letters, forums, press contacts, and petitions.
- Offer creative solutions that might preserve services and allow all members of the community to practice their faith without compromise. 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 the services it finds objectionable.
- Influence the approval process by local or state government. Learn how it works and where you can have a voice in the process. You might even consider bringing a lawsuit to stop the process while alternatives are studied.

- Monitor the outcome of any and all agreements to ensure that promises are kept and services are provided.
- Join the Religious Coalition's national interfaith campaign. Pro-choice people of faith must insist that hospitals respect religious diversity and serve their entire community. Hundreds of clergy, congregations, and organizations have been contacted about the campaign and have received a new resource guide for faith-based activism to counter religious restrictions on health care. Your participation is important.
- Obtain the guide by contacting us at the address or email below. The guide was developed with other health, advocacy, and faith-based organizations that are working to ensure reproductive health care is accessible to all Americans: MergerWatch, Family Planning Advocates of New York State, People for the American Way, Catholics for a Free Choice, and RESOLVE, the infertility association.

Sources

MergerWatch, www.mergerwatch.org

When Catholic and Non-Catholic Hospitals Merge and Catholic Health Restrictions Updated, Catholics for a Free Choice, www.cath4choice.org.

Hospital Mergers and the Threat to Women's Reproductive Health, National Women's Law Center, www.nwlc.org.

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, founded in 1973, is the national organization of pro-choice people of faith. The Religious Coalition – comprising Protestant, Jewish, and other denominations and faith groups, the Clergy for Choice Network, and state affiliates throughout the country – works to ensure reproductive choice through the moral power of religious communities. All programs seek to give clear voice to the reproductive health issues of people of color, those living in poverty, and other underserved populations.

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