

LIFE ISSUES FORUM

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For Immediate Release

Abortion Returns to the Health Care Reform Debate

By

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Congress passed the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) in March, amidst an unresolved debate about the legislation's impact on abortion and conscience protection. As president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Cardinal Francis George explained then that the bishops had to oppose the final bill despite their strong support for health care reform, because (among other things) it *appropriates billions of dollars in new funding without explicitly prohibiting the use of these funds for abortion.* Others dismissed this charge, saying that legislative intent and a last-minute executive order from President Obama prevented abortion funding.

Fast-forward to July, when one of those PPACA provisions appropriating billions of dollars was about to take effect. Section 1101 of the Act provides \$5 billion for *high-risk insurance pools,* providing much-needed health coverage for people with *pre-existing conditions* who cannot otherwise get coverage. This program ends in January 2014, when these patients can join others in purchasing qualified health plans on the new state insurance exchanges. State governments can propose the benefits list and other details for covering their residents in these pools, but the federal government makes final decisions and provides all government funds for subsidizing this coverage.

Pro-life groups found that several states - beginning with Pennsylvania, New Mexico and Maryland - had announced on their web sites that their statewide plans would include elective abortions. (New Mexico used the phrase openly; Pennsylvania said its plan would not cover *elective abortions,* but would cover abortions that are legal under the Supreme Court's decisions - meaning any abortion an abortionist sees as needed for a woman's social or emotional *well-being.*) These plans were described as already approved, and New Mexico had already begun signing up enrollees.

Public criticism of this development prompted immediate denials and evasive responses. An initial response from the Department of Health and Human Services insisted that *federal funds* would not cover these abortions - leaving open the prospect that everyone who enrolls could be forced to fund other people's abortions with their premium dollars. Late on July 14, however, HHS issued a new and more welcome response, saying that abortions simply *will not be covered* in these plans except in cases of rape, incest or danger to the mother's life, as has long been true in federally subsidized health plans for federal employees.

Now pro-abortion groups are crying foul, with the interesting complaint that this pro-life outcome goes beyond anything in PPACA or

the executive order. In other words, they are saying the bishops' analysis of loopholes in these documents is right.

The high-risk pool program is just one funding stream left open to abortion by PPACA. For now it seems pro-life forces have won the first round, through careful research and a prompt public response. But PPACA needs a legislative fix to close such loopholes once and for all. That fix is offered by the *Protect Life Act* (H.R. 5111) sponsored by Rep. Joe Pitts (R-PA) and 115 other House members, including 13 Democrats. Whether these or other billions of dollars in taxpayers' funds are used to help kill unborn children is not a matter we should leave to shifting politics or to chance.

(Mr. Doerflinger is Associate Director of the Secretariat of Pro-Life Activities, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. To learn more about the bishops' pro-life activities see www.usccb.org/prolife.)