

Goal-oriented Advocacy Essential in Healthcare Reform

With the healthcare reform debate intensifying, public discourse on the issue has begun to focus more on the mechanics of various proposals and less on the broad goals and principles that inform different plans. But as Rev. Kevin D. O'Rourke, OP, JCD, reminded the audience at a March conference sponsored by the Saint Louis University School of Medicine, those goals and principles must remain the ultimate test of whether a given proposal is acceptable.

Fr. O'Rourke urged those attending the conference, which focused on political and ethical implications of President Clinton's Health Security Act, to advocate for a system that:

- Provides universal access to healthcare
- Treats healthcare as a public service rather than a business
- Ensures adequate quality of care

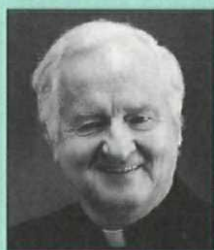
UNIVERSAL ACCESS

One obstacle to universal access in the United States has been "a strong inclination toward individualism as a philosophy of life," Fr. O'Rourke said. He noted, however, that some of the negative consequences of this philosophy are leading many people to rethink the relationship between individuals and society.

"We are now recognizing not only the need but the responsibility to treat other people with much more care and respect," Fr. O'Rourke pointed out. The argument that everyone should receive healthcare, he added, is part of a larger argument about the character and direction of our culture—and about our moral and ethical maturity.

"Promoting personal responsibility will also be critical to transforming our healthcare system," Fr. O'Rourke said. He noted that providing universal access will be a hollow accomplishment if people fail to understand that they, more than the healthcare system, are responsible for their health.

Universal access does not mean that "everybody is going to have unlimited access to every possible healthcare procedure," Fr. O'Rourke



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said. Rather, our obligation as a society is to ensure access to a set of basic services that enable people to live a healthy, productive life.

HEALTHCARE AS A PUBLIC SERVICE

The argument for universal access is tied to the key principle that healthcare is, like police protection, part of the common good, Fr. O'Rourke said. But in recognizing that healthcare is a common good, we must also understand that our society must make wise use of the resources it makes available for these services. "We are spending too much on healthcare today," he reminded the audience. "The debate on reform should involve a total reevaluation of where our money is going and how it is being used."

QUALITY OF CARE

The final goal of systemic reform should be to ensure that persons receive an adequate quality of care, Fr. O'Rourke noted. Although outcomes are commonly used as criteria for measuring quality, he said, from an ethical perspective the personal relationship between the care giver and the patient is more important. "The notions of compassion, empathy, and care have to be emphasized more now than in the past because they are in danger of being submerged as people develop plans that ensure universal access," Fr. O'Rourke observed.

A REVOLUTION

Advocates for a just and fair healthcare system must remember that they are part of a revolution, Fr. O'Rourke concluded. "Don't be afraid to reject a given proposal because it negates one of our priorities or makes it impossible to achieve one of our objectives," he urged. "Don't be afraid to carry that revolution forward to its ethical conclusion."
—Phil Rheinecker

A videotape addressing the ethics of healthcare reform—part of an eight-video set on healthcare ethics—has been made available by the Saint Louis University Center for Health Care Ethics. For further information or to order, call 800-443-3901.