

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194 * 202-541-3103 • FAX 202-541-3166

Nationwide Bulletin Insert **URGENT: Respond by September 30**

Conscience Rights Violated by Sweeping HHS Contraceptive Mandate

In implementing the 2010 Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (the new health care reform law), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recently issued a rule requiring almost all private health plans to cover contraception and sterilization as "preventive services" for women. The mandate even forces individuals and groups with religious or moral objections to purchase and provide such coverage if they are to receive or provide health coverage at all. This poses an unprecedented threat to individual and institutional religious freedom.

The rule includes a religious exemption so extremely narrow that it protects almost no one. It covers only a "religious employer" that has the "inculcation of religious values" as its purpose, primarily employs and serves persons who share its religious tenets, and is a church organization under two narrow provisions of the tax code. A great many religious organizations - including Catholic colleges and universities, as well as hospitals and charitable institutions that serve the public -- will be ineligible. Individuals and religiously affiliated health insurers will not qualify for the exemption. The new rule would force insurance plans to cover "all Food and Drug Administration approved contraceptive methods, sterilization procedures, and patient education and counseling for all women with reproductive capacity." Never before has the federal government required private health plans to include such coverage. The FDA-approved "emergency contraception" (EC) drugs that are covered by this mandate can work by interfering with implantation of a newly conceived human being. Also, the drug the FDA most recently approved for EC, "Ella," a close analogue to the abortion drug RU-486, has been shown in animal tests to cause abortion. Thus, the mandate includes drugs that may cause an abortion both before and after implantation.

The public comment period on this interim final rule ends September 30.

ACTION: Please send an e-mail message to HHS by visiting www.usccb.org/conscience. Once you send your comments to HHS, you will be automatically invited to send a message to your elected representatives in Congress, urging them to support the Respect for Rights of Conscience Act (H.R. 1179/S. 1467) to ensure that such federal mandates do not violate Americans' moral and religious convictions.

MESSAGE TO HHS: "Pregnancy is not a disease, and drugs and surgeries to prevent it are not basic health care that the government should require all Americans to purchase. Please remove sterilization and prescription contraceptives from the list of 'preventive services' the federal government is mandating in private health plans. It is especially important to exclude any drug that may cause an early abortion, and to fully respect religious freedom as other federal laws do. The narrow religious exemption in HHS's new rule protects almost no one. I urge you to allow all organizations and individuals to offer, sponsor and obtain health coverage that does not violate their moral and religious convictions."

WHEN: Please send your comments to HHS by the **September 30 deadline**. Thanks! 9/9/11