

Unconscionable

by the Reverend Rebecca Turner, St. Louis, MO

After decades of public and private debate, a sweeping health care plan was passed by Congress that included provisions for every American to be covered by health care insurance, thus gaining access to basic medical care.

Since its passage, HHS and the FDA have made decisions about which medical procedures and pharmaceuticals are to be considered basic care, must be offered in every plan, and are to be fully covered without a co-pay by the insured. Women across the nation cheered when they learned that all forms of contraception were on the list of basic care.

Then another debate began: Some religious institutions insisted they should be exempt from providing insurance coverage for contraception based upon the "conscience" of the institution. President Obama met with Catholic leaders to hear their views, but ultimately decided that only churches, not hospitals or universities, could claim an exemption for religious reasons.

I applaud this decision by the President.

The distinction between church and other institutions is a fair one. Churches are primarily for those of that particular faith. But universities and hospitals exist for a wider public. If they do not require their employees to practice their religious faith, they should not expect those employees to live their private lives by the standards of that faith.

That any religious organization would claim its organizational "conscience" to be more important than the right of individuals to receive equal access to medical care is, quite frankly, unconscionable. That this particular care is women's health care is a clear act of discrimination against female employees of all faiths.

The Obama decision does not require that a hospital perform abortions or sterilizations. It does not require a doctor to prescribe contraception. It does not require a religious school to dispense emergency contraception. It only requires that all institutions who provide health care insurance plans meet the government standards.

Contraception is indeed basic health care. 98% of all women use modern forms of contraception during their fertile years. There is nothing more basic to a woman's health than the timing of children. Nor is there anything more basic to her role as a productive employee.

Should where a woman works be the determining factor in whether she is eligible for insurance coverage? Certainly not. Should she face religious discrimination by her employer and be refused this basic care? Unconscionable.