

ABORTION HAUNTS HEALTH CARE REFORM

Over the past several months we have been jolted by the inconsistencies of the Obama administration regarding abortion in the health care bills. In the September issue of *Catalyst*, we noted that we were skeptical of the president's intention to exclude abortion funding in the health care bill. Later on, we decided to give him the benefit of the doubt following his address to Congress stating that abortion would not be funded in the public option of the bill. Finally, we noted that President Obama has all of the information he needs to make the right decision to back an amendment that explicitly rejects abortion funding in the health care bill.

When President Obama appeared on *BlogTalkRadio* to address health care reform he told the left-wing religious audience, "You've heard that this is all going to mean government funding of abortion. Not true." But we wondered why the House Committee on Ways and Means approved the America's Health Choices Act (H.R. 3200) but voted down an amendment, sponsored by Rep. Eric Cantor, that would have barred "government funding of abortion."

While addressing the audience, the president said that there "is a lot of misinformation" about this issue. But how could he say that knowing that an amendment specifically prohibiting abortion was defeated? Was he lying or was he misinformed?

When President Obama spoke to Congress about health care reform on September 9, we wondered if he would discuss abortion; to our surprise he did. We said that the rational thing for the president to do would be to drop abortion from the health care bills and support conscience rights for health care workers. Obama did nothing of the sort. Instead, he offered a one-sentence denial claiming that his health care

proposal would not result in federal funding of abortion; that simply was not true.

Even the *New York Times*, which strongly endorsed his speech, said in a news analysis that his claim that there is no federal funding for abortion “is not so clear-cut.” Indeed, it said, “the public and private money would all go into the same pot, and the source of money for any single procedure is largely a technicality.”

We noted that the president was playing a shell game. He defended the public option in his speech, and under that plan, the person in charge of deciding whether abortion coverage will be mandated is his Secretary of Health and Human Services, Kathleen Sebelius, the former pro-abortion governor of Kansas who never saw an abortion bill that she didn't like.

But Richard Doerflinger, a prominent voice for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on life issues, welcomed Obama's pledge not to include abortion coverage in the health care reform bill. Doerflinger was joined by Sister Carol Keehan, the head of the Catholic Health Association.

On the other hand, people like Father Frank Pavone of Priests for Life maintained that the president's proclamations represent “bogus claims.” Also unconvinced were such organizations as the National Right to Life Committee and the Susan B. Anthony List, as well as pro-life congressmen like Rep. Chris Smith. Independent journalists like Dan Gilgoff were also wary of Obama's commitment, asserting that “On abortion—and for the moment—the White House isn't budging at all.”

This wasn't a split between social justice Catholics and pro-life Catholics, or between secularists and people of faith. This was a divide within the pro-life Catholic community. All of the aforementioned are men and women of sincerity, and all of them are well informed.

On closer inspection, the chasm isn't as wide as it seems. None of these leaders will support a bill that includes federal funding for abortion. The split comes down to the issue of trust: Can we expect the president to deliver a health care bill that excludes public monies for abortion?

On September 13, it appeared that we had finally gotten the promise we were looking for. Kathleen Sebelius appeared on ABC with George Stephanopoulos and told him that President Obama was committed to signing a health care bill that excludes federal funding of abortion. Although both Obama and Sebelius are rabid supporters of abortion-on-demand, fairness dictated that we take them at their word.

When Bill Donohue was asked by Ed Schultz on MSNBC whether the president was lying about abortion funding in the health care bill, Donohue said that if Obama was interpreted as saying that in H.R. 3200 there is no provision for abortion, then he was simply wrong. But Donohue gave the president the benefit of the doubt that he will put his imprimatur on a bill that excludes abortion funding.

We finally called for the president to back the amendment drafted by Rep. Bart Stupak and Rep. Joe Pitts, that would bar abortion funding from H.R. 3200. We noted that neither President Obama nor Secretary Sebelius minced their words on this subject. This is a critical juncture—the time has come for the president to deliver on his pledge. The Catholic community anxiously awaits his next move.