

RELIGIOUS HEALTH RESTRICTIONS

M E R G E R W A T C H F A C T S H E E T
S E P T E M B E R 2 0 0 5

Religious Health Restrictions Threaten Women's Health and Endanger Women's Lives

What are religious health restrictions?

Religious health restrictions use anti-choice doctrine, rather than medical science, to determine which health care services a patient may receive. Hospitals and clinics are forced to deny women access to basic health services when doctrine guides medical care. Religious health restrictions are most frequently used to prohibit birth control counseling and prescriptions, emergency contraception for rape victims, tubal ligations, abortions, infertility services and "safer sex" counseling about how to prevent HIV/AIDS and STDs. End-of-life decision-making can also be affected. Catholic leaders condemned as "murder" the decision of Terri Schiavo's husband to remove her feeding tube after doctors said she had no hope of recovery.

How are women and their doctors being affected?

Across the United States, women are being denied needed health care because their hospitals, HMOs, pharmacies and employers are using religious health care rules to restrict medical services and information:

- A woman who has just been raped arrives at a hospital emergency room. "What if I become pregnant from the rape? Is there something I can do to prevent it?" she asks. "I'm sorry," the ER doctor says, "but we aren't allowed to give you emergency contraception. It's against the religious doctrine of our hospital."
- A mother of two is about to deliver her third child. "My doctor says my high blood pressure is so dangerous that I shouldn't have any more children. I'm planning to have my tubes tied right after I give birth,"

she tells the nurse who is helping her fill out paperwork for admission to the hospital. "I'm sorry," the nurse says, "our hospital has joined a religious health system and it has banned tubal ligations."

- A young woman arrives for her first day at work as an administrative assistant at a local college. She is given a packet of information about her health insurance coverage. "What kind of birth control does our plan include?" she asks the personnel director. "None," the director says. "We're a Catholic college and we don't believe in it."
- A woman comes to a hospital emergency department and is diagnosed with a dangerous ectopic pregnancy. If her fallopian tube ruptures, there is a significant risk of death, but the religiously-affiliated hospital refuses to end the doomed pregnancy because a fetal heartbeat was detected and the procedure might be considered an abortion. "We had to put her in an ambulance, send her to a non-religious hospital and hope she made it there safely," her

doctor says in dismay. "I can't sleep at night worrying that one of my patients will die on the expressway."

Don't these religious hospitals get public money?

Yes. A 2002 study by the MergerWatch Project found that nearly 600 religiously-affiliated hospitals in the United States receive more than \$45 billion in public funding each year. More than half their operating revenues come from Medicare, Medicaid and other government programs. The rest comes from commercial insurance reimbursements, not from churches or other religious organizations. Although supported by our tax money and insurance premiums, these hospitals are not required to provide the health care services that women need.

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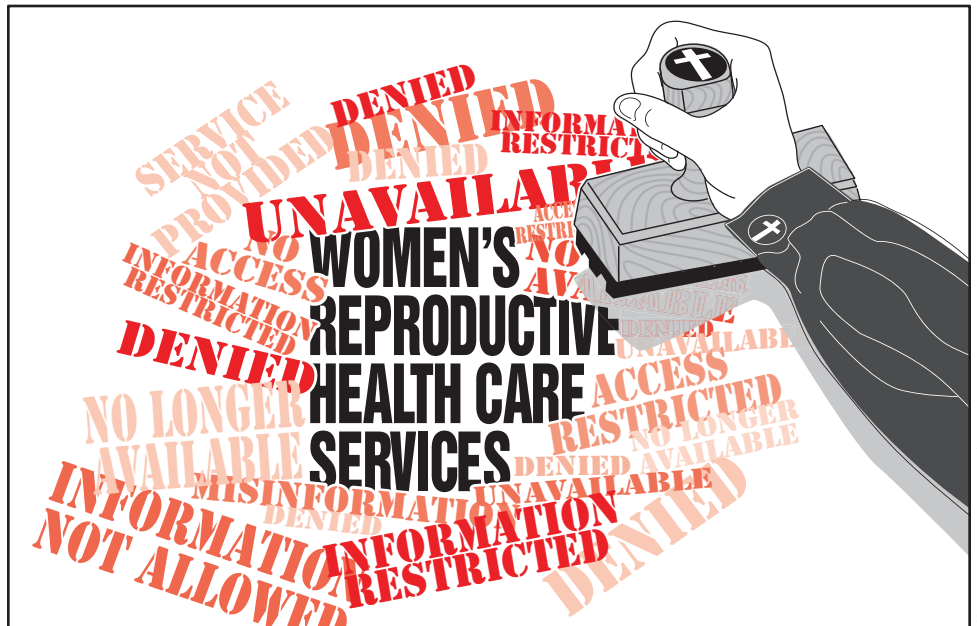


Illustration: Bruce Rosch

So, why isn't our government protecting women from religious health restrictions?

Instead of protecting women's rights to make decisions about our health care, Washington policymakers are giving taxpayer-funded faith-based health providers more and more power to use religious doctrine to deny women needed health care.

In an astounding move, Congress attached to a 2005 spending bill an amendment that protects religious health providers from "discrimination." As a result, states and local governments can be penalized with the loss of their federal funding if they try to insist that faith-based providers give women the reproductive health information and services they need.

Because of opposition from Catholic Bishops, Congress has opposed efforts to require hospitals receiving federal funding to offer emergency contraception to victims of sexual assault.

The U.S. Department of Justice did not even mention emergency contraception in its new national protocol for treatment of survivors of sexual assault.

How are anti-choice religious views being introduced into government policy?

Congress and the Bush administration have introduced "faith-based" ideas into many government health programs and have worked to de-fund or downsize those programs that conflict with fundamentalist religious views:

- *Abstinence-only programs.* Abstinence-only education is being funded at record levels. Recipients of federal funding must teach students that abstinence until marriage is the expected standard of behavior. There is no instruction about contraception, although many students are already sexually active and at risk for pregnancy or STDs.
- *Hostility to contraception.* The administration attempted to remove contraceptive coverage from federal employee health benefit plans and refused to fund an increased need for Title X clinics, which provide free or low-cost family planning services to low-income women.
- *Obstructing access to emergency contraception.* Despite expert medical/scientific recommendations that the emergency contraception pill Plan B should be switched from prescription-only status to over-the-counter sale, the FDA has repeatedly delayed a decision. Intense lobbying by religious conservatives is believed to be influencing the FDA.
- *Censorship of government health information.* Government websites are providing incomplete or inaccurate information about condoms and incorrectly suggested that abortion causes breast cancer.

Are there pro-choice religious groups working to oppose anti-choice religious health restrictions?

Yes. Many religious denominations fully support reproductive rights. There are also organizations representing people of faith that are working to oppose religious health restrictions. Two of the most prominent such groups are Catholics for a Free Choice (www.catholicsforchoice.org) and the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (www.rcrc.org). In New York, Concerned Clergy for Choice (www.edfundfpa.org) is working to raise pro-choice clergy voices in opposition to the religious right.

How can we fight religious restrictions that threaten women's health?

The MergerWatch Project is working with like-minded organizations to prevent religious restrictions from threatening women's health and endangering women's lives. We assist community activists trying to stop the imposition of religious health restrictions at nonsectarian hospitals when they merge with or are acquired by religiously-affiliated health systems. We also work on the state and national levels to promote policies that will protect consumer access to vital health services and prevent the use of religious health concepts in determining government policy. To learn more about what you can do, visit our website at www.mergerwatch.org or contact us at lois@mergerwatch.org.



an affiliate of
Community Catalyst
PO Box 540, JAF Station
New York, NY 10116
ph (212) 261-4314
fx (510) 740-3610
cell: (518) 281-4134
email: lois@mergerwatch.org
www.mergerwatch.org