

Alliance

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According to the U.S. Bishops' 1994 "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services," Catholic health-care institutions are obliged to follow church teachings against abortion, euthanasia, sterilization and artificial contraception.

However, the same directives note that Catholic institutions are forming operational alliances with secular institutions, some of which do not comply with church teaching on all these issues. In such cases, the directives call on local bishops, and the Catholic health institutions involved, to take steps that ensure such alliances do not scandalize the faithful or compromise the church's ability to teach on health-care issues.

So why, if Park Ridge and St. Mary's are working together, can Park Ridge continue to provide services that contradict church teaching? It all comes down to the agreement, Unity officials said.

From the start of their negotiations, Unity officials said, Park Ridge and St. Mary's agreed that both institutions wished to remain what they each were — one, a secular hospital; the other, a Catholic hospital.

"It was never the intention that Park Ridge hospital would become Catholic," said Sister Betsy MacKinnon, DC, vice president for mission at Unity.

Stewart Putnam, president of St. Mary's and vice president of Unity, added that St. Mary's and Park Ridge hospitals did share a strong commitment to the poor and the elderly — and the revenue challenges that such a commitment entails, he said.

Seventy percent of the patients coming to the two hospitals are either on Medicaid or Medicare, Putnam explained. The federal government began cutting back on these programs a few years back, he recalled, compelling St. Mary's, in particular, to explore an alliance with another local hospital.

"The ability of St. Mary's to survive by itself was significantly threatened," he said.

Thus, the two hospitals have combined many of their services. For example, the Park Ridge campus will be home to St. Mary's new obstetrical unit, the Family Birth Center. This center, which is currently under construction, will follow church teachings. Meanwhile, St. Mary's campus will become home to Park Ridge's new 120-bed nursing home, which will be located on the second and third floors of St. Mary's Hospital next

year.

Park Ridge has never performed abortions, and agrees with church teachings on such end-of-life issues as physician-assisted suicide, according to Putnam. However, he and other officials noted that Park Ridge will continue to offer such sterilization services as tubal ligations. Fewer than 50 are performed at Park Ridge each year, he said.

Sister MacKinnon added that St. Mary's physicians will continue to uphold church teachings in their practices. For example, she noted that these physicians would not prescribe artificial contraceptives for their patients.

However, she said, physicians employed by Park Ridge are not obligated to follow the church's health-care directives in such areas as contraception.

Both Putnam and MacKinnon emphasized that St. Mary's and the Daughters of Charity do not approve of Park Ridge practices that violate church teachings. However, MacKinnon added that when it comes to the commitment to serving the poor and marginalized, the two hospitals' differences are less significant than their common concerns.

"We don't approve of those procedures," she said of such practices as sterilizations. "But both (hospitals) believe in good quality service."

A view from Washington

Secular-Catholic health alliances are complex and difficult to form because of the ethical issues involved, according to Sister Jean DeBlois, CSJ, vice president for mission services of the Catholic Health Association, a national organization of Catholic health-care institutions.

In a phone interview from her Washington, D.C., office, Sister DeBlois explained that there is no one, universal standard the church can apply to the formation of secular-Catholic health alliances. However, most Catholic hospitals would not consider merging with a secular hospital that performs abortions and/or supports physician-assisted suicide, Sister DeBlois said. Yet bishops and Catholic hospitals tend to be less universal in their approach to alliances and mergers with secular hospitals that provide contraceptive services, Sister DeBlois added.

"It's case-by-case," she said.

Unity advantages outweigh ethical concerns

Sister Patricia Schoelles
Guest Contributor

The alliance between St. Mary's Hospital and Park Ridge Hospital became necessary because of recent changes in health-care delivery. These changes made it clear to everyone involved that St. Mary's would not be able to continue its operation without an association with another hospital. Because St. Mary's is the only Catholic hospital in the Rochester area, and because it cares for many who are unable to find health care elsewhere, those involved found it even more important to provide for the survival of this wonderful facility.

Thus, from the perspective of Catholic moral theology, the alliance between St. Mary's and Park Ridge Hospital allows for several significant goods:

First, the continuation of St. Mary's will provide access to quality health care for people who are otherwise underserved by the health-care system. We all know that St. Mary's is located in a section of the city in great need of this kind of access. We all know, too, that St. Mary's provides care for

the uninsured and underinsured that the other local hospitals do not provide.

Second, the alliance will reduce unnecessary waste of our limited health-care resources. In today's environment, sharing services between hospitals is necessary because it eliminates unnecessary duplication of services and thus helps to keep costs down.

Finally, the alliance will allow St. Mary's to continue to operate its obstetric service as a Catholic facility and according to the religious and ethical directives for Catholic hospitals. This means that Rochester will continue to benefit from the availability of at least one facility that upholds Catholic ethical standards in obstetric care.

These are enormous goods and very important to the church.

Are there downsides to this arrangement? You bet. Again from the perspective of moral theology, the relocation of the St. Mary's obstetric unit onto the campus of the Park Ridge Hospital means that St. Mary's risks being associated with medical practices that the church rejects, especially sterilization. Even though the obstetric

unit intends to continue to operate as a Catholic service run by St. Mary's according to the religious and ethical directives, the relocation brings it into close proximity to areas of the Park Ridge Hospital where sterilizations are performed.

This means that St. Mary's Hospital and Unity Health Care must make special effort to make it clear, to Catholics and to the general public, that St. Mary's does not approve of direct sterilizations and neither St. Mary's nor its employees perform this procedure. This is a hard task, and some confusion on this issue has already taken place in the press.

Still, it is an effort well worth whatever it takes. The benefits that will result from the alliance between St. Mary's and Park Ridge are absolutely too great to risk being derailed by our inability to communicate clearly the moral dimensions of what is actually occurring in the alliance between St. Mary's and Park Ridge.

Sister Schoelles, president of St. Bernard's Institute, writes a regular column, "The Moral Life," for the Catholic Courier.

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