

WORLD & NATION

Hospital administrators ponder challenges

NEW YORK (CNS) — Meeting for the last time this century, participants in the Catholic Healthcare Administrative Personnel program heard calls to look ahead for ways to resolve new challenges to health care without losing sight of their Catholic roots.

As one speaker urged the administrators to help bring health care to the forefront as an issue in the 2000 elections, another called on them to assure that any mergers or joint ventures with non-Catholic institutions allow them sufficient control of the joint operation.

Other speakers at the May 16-21 meeting discussed such topics as attacks on Catholic health care by Planned Parenthood and other groups, changing settings for health-care ministry, and union organizing at Catholic hospitals.

The CHAP program is offered each May for administrators of Catholic hospitals, and is held at St. John's University in Queens with sponsorship by the Catholic Medical Centers of Brooklyn and Queens.

Father Michael D. Place, president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association, opened the meeting by repeating his call for Catholics to make health care a key issue in the 2000 presidential election.

The CHA is asking each presidential candidate to pledge: "As president, I will make accessible and affordable health care a priority of my administration."

Father Place said Catholics would not be able to determine the outcome of a national debate on health care, but that the size of the Catholic community and the major role of Catholic institutions provided a potential influence. "Our advocacy can change a nation," he said.

An essential part of the identity of Catholic health care has been its concern for serving the poor, Father Place said. But this has become increasingly difficult

when new approaches of managed care reduce the former possibility of getting enough money from those who could pay to provide some margin for serving those unable to pay, he said.

How Catholic institutions react to this challenge "will test the depth of our commitment and the breadth of our creativity," he said.

In Elmira, St. Joseph's Hospital has taken up Father Place's challenge. Petitions for the CHA's "Be Heard in Campaign 2000" have been displayed in the cafeteria and lobby.

"What we are doing, have been doing and will continue to do is distribute the flyers, pamphlets and encourage employees if they wish to sign them and return them to my department," said Denis Sweeney, director of marketing/communications for St. Joseph's. He said the department had forwarded more than 150 signed cards (detached from the petitions) to the CHA since mid-August.

"We've gotten a very good response from our employees and a good response from the public," Sweeney said, adding that people also may send the cards on themselves. They read:

"I (name) believe that too many Americans do not have access to affordable healthcare coverage. It's time for a national discussion on healthcare reform —

we need to put healthcare reform at the top of the American agenda. I commit myself to participating in this dialogue and I urge all presidential candidates to do the same by signing the CHA presidential pledge."

CHA plans to forward the names obtained to all presidential candidates.

Also at CHAP's meeting, Sister Melanie DiPietro, a Sister of Charity and attorney specializing in church-related charitable corporations, urged similar creativity in arranging mergers or joint ventures that preserve Catholic identity.

A religious order authorized to act publicly on behalf of the church must operate in accordance with church norms and make sure its holdings are used in accordance with church-approved purposes, she said.

It is not enough to talk about maintaining a "presence" or an "influence" in the newly established joint operation, Sister DiPietro said. "Canonically, those terms mean nothing. You either have sufficient control or you don't."

If an order lacks the capacity to continue operating an institution and cannot

work out a satisfactory agreement for a partnership, it may be best to sell the institution and use the money to serve its purpose in some other way, she said.

Jesuit Father Richard A. McCormick, retired professor of ethics at the University of Notre Dame, said Catholic health ministry may need to shift from hospitals to other settings where people can be given more personal care.

Changes in the way hospitals operate in the American context have made it increasingly difficult to provide a Catholic ministry there, he said.

The kind of acute care given by hospitals is still needed, but it may not be the best place now for Catholics to carry out their sense of a healing mission, he said.

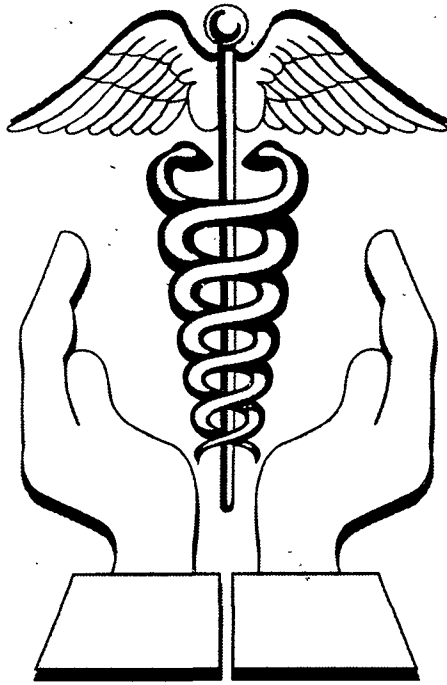
Father McCormick, whose father was a physician and who said he had extensive experience as a patient in Catholic hospitals, said the kind of nursing that nuns provided was the soul of the Catholic hospital and is now largely missing.

"The culture of Catholic health care has been weakened, and is in danger of disappearing," he said.

In a final address, Auxiliary Bishop Joseph M. Sullivan of Brooklyn called for more thought about how Catholic health-care institutions should respond to groups such as Planned Parenthood.

These groups are interested particularly in "reproductive services," and voice opposition when the mergers of Catholic with non-Catholic institutions lead to reduced availability of abortion and other procedures objectionable to Catholics.

Contains additional reporting by Kathleen Schwar.



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