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Include legal immigrants in health care or don't tax them

By Mar Muñoz-Visoso

On December 10, 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The United States was a signatory nation. Article 25 reads as follows:

(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care...

(2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance...

More than sixty years later, the wealthiest nation in the Western Hemisphere has not figured out yet how to ensure these basic human rights to its population. Worse, some people in the U.S. seem not to want to figure it out.

The current debate on health care reform is a clear example. There are many things that make the United States a great nation. As an American citizen, however, I am not sure 47 million uninsured people (or even 30 million for the optimistic) is something I can be proud of.

Having, in my youth, been the beneficiary of the public/private European system, with all its different versions, I have a hard time understanding Americans' fear of a public health system which allows for a multitude of private options. I hear a lot of misinformation and people sticking to political and social apprehensions of the past (Hitler's socialized medicine, Communism) that, though well founded, we must overcome. More often than not, it has to do with powerful interests that have little to do with patient concerns and needs and with all Americans' right to health care.

As a youngster, my mom would take us to the family doctor in the public health system for our regular ailments, and if the need arose to see a specialist. We would have a choice between the public system and a private insurance we were able to get through my father's employer. Not everyone enjoyed those two options, but at least almost everyone had a safety net. The decision whether to go through one system or the other came down to where the best specialist was, often over waiting times.

Here at home, last week I tried to make an appointment for two of my kids to have a physical before starting school. They've been away for six weeks. There were no openings until November. But why am I surprised? When I needed to see the stomach doctor six years ago the wait was also 16 weeks! I

am sure a little healthy competition can encourage private insurance companies to improve waiting times and service.

The Catholic Church believes that health care, like education, is a basic human right. That is why the U.S. Bishops state that health care reform needs to; a) include health care coverage for all people from conception until natural death; b) include access for all with a special concern for the poor, and include legal residents; c) pursue the common good and preserve pluralism, including freedom of conscience; and d) restrain costs and apply them equitably among the payers (<http://www.usccb.org/healthcare/>).

Some fuss at the bishops' insistence that legal immigrants be included and covered under health care reform. They also don't understand the bishops' position that undocumented pregnant women and children should receive coverage to ensure that newborns are born healthy and children receive regular checkups and vaccinations.

If the human rights argument does not convince you, consider this: legal immigrants work—with U.S. government authorization— and pay taxes into the system just as U.S. citizens do; they are not a burden to the U.S. health care system (see 2006 report from the non-partisan Kaiser Foundation, July 2009 article by the American Journal of Public Health and others). According to the Immigration Policy Center they also cost much less to cover because they are on average younger, healthier and less likely to access primary or emergency health care. In fact, U.S citizens make up 78 percent of the non-elderly uninsured.

On the other hand, the more persons who pay into the health care system, the more the risk —and the costs— are spread out across the population. Allowing legal immigrants to purchase affordable health care will result in billions of dollars in insurance premiums, helping to pay for the cost of health care reform in the United States.

If you are not going to allow them access to health or other benefits, then do not tax them. It's a matter of fairness. And let's hope that none of them sneezes near us.