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New regs will protect health care workers' religious convictions

By Congressman Joe Pitts

The Department of Health and Human Services recently proposed new regulations meant to protect health care providers' right of conscience. This proposal is an important step toward ensuring that healthcare professionals will not have to abandon their moral and religious convictions when they come to work.

The regulations are meant to increase compliance with laws protecting federally funded health care providers' right of conscience by requiring that recipients of federal funds verify they are complying with conscience laws. These laws were established to prevent discrimination against physicians, health care professionals, hospitals, health insurance plans, or any other kind of health care facility, who object to abortion on the basis of "religious beliefs or moral convictions." The new proposed regulations do not provide for any new protections; they simply seek to help ensure the enforcement of these important protections.

Healthcare providers deserve protections for their legal right to practice without violating their religious beliefs or moral convictions. On an issue as fundamental as life, healthcare providers should not be forced to abandon their moral convictions when they come to work. This issue strikes right to the heart of our nation's founding as a place where individuals could be free to practice their religious faith unhindered.

Protecting an individual's right to refuse to offer services that are morally or religiously objectionable may seem like common sense, but it is already being attacked by some.

Ironically, the criticism has been loudest from those who claim to be "pro-choice." These critics are opposing regulations that would protect the freedom of health care providers to choose to practice according to their conscience.

Over the past three decades, Congress has enacted several statutes to safeguard provider conscience rights, and the proposed regulations would increase awareness of and compliance with these laws.

It is important to note that any claims by healthcare officials who feel they are being discriminated against will be handled by the Office of Civil Rights. This shows that protecting the freedoms of health care workers who are discriminated against due to religious or moral beliefs is indeed a civil rights issue.

At issue here is the ability of people of religious and moral conviction to be free to participate in the healthcare profession.

The rhetoric from the so-called "pro-choice" lobby is additionally ironic when you consider that even more women may lose the ability to choose providers who share their values — particularly respect for unborn children — if pro-life individuals are forced out of the healthcare profession.

Congress has already made the decision to protect pro-life healthcare professionals. However, the Department of Health and Human Services determined that many Americans, and even health care providers, were not aware that federal law affords protection to those who do not wish to participate in life-destroying activities. By proposing regulations, HHS is simply providing better enforcement of the protections that are already in law and working to educate and enforce the laws that Congress has enacted over the last three decades.

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