

It would have been very useful if [Jeff Mero, Executive Director](#) , Association of Washington Public Hospital Districts, had engaged the San Juan Island community in a discussion about the tradeoffs involved when rural communities rely on faith-based organizations to deliver publicly subsidized health care prior to construction of the facility in Friday Harbor.

Perhaps the Washington State Constitution might have come up in that conversation, very specifically the part that says: "No public money or property shall be appropriated for or applied to any religious worship, exercise or instruction, or the support of any religious establishment."

As it stands, later this year, Washington State is on track to become the first state in the union where more than half the acute-care hospital beds (which increasingly is becoming a good proxy for the overall health care system) are subject to the doctrine of the Catholic bishops. Many of these facilities are supported with property tax dollars. This happened because many Washingtonians, including the hospital district commissioners, were not being vigilant about protecting the separation of Church and State as required by our state's Constitution. It's time to start.

As it stands, 95-97% of the property tax islanders pay to support health care over the next 50 years will go to subsidize PeaceHealth, which this summer is slated to merge with a division of Catholic Health Initiatives (CHI). CHI, it should be noted, is a "Public Juridic Person" with an ecclesiastical reporting relationship to the Vatican. It is part of the Catholic Church. When an official CHI representative speaks, that person is speaking for the Catholic Church.

Would San Juan Islanders have approved this facility if they had known the 50-year contract would be with an entity of the Catholic Church itself? I doubt it, but we'll never know, since we didn't have that discussion. Instead, when objections were raised about the influence of the Catholic Church, community members were advised there were no substantive issues and if they still didn't feel comfortable, they could raise their issues directly with one of the nuns at PeaceHealth. The hospital district commissioners who were satisfied that no problems existed had no idea that PeaceHealth had been in discussions for years to merge with an entity of the Catholic Church.

There's no question that the Catholic bishops believe that Catholic hospitals are religious institutions first and foremost. Last week, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S.

Conference of Bishops said, "these ministries are integral to our church and worthy of the same exemption as our Catholic churches."

Perhaps none of this would matter if we were talking about an academic issue with little impact on real people's lives. But I've seen the impact of Catholic doctrine on health care close up – first as the eighth-born child to very Catholic parents, including a mother who was prochoice because she knew women who'd died from botched abortions, then as the sister to a sibling who lost her best friend to cancer after the doctors in the Catholic hospital she was admitted to refused to consider chemo or an abortion in the early stages of pregnancy. Later, I served as the health care advocate for another sister, dying from melanoma, who was treated here in Washington and who asked me to ensure she never entered a Catholic facility; she wanted the peace of mind to know that her end-of-life decisions would be respected.

Seattleites started to become more aware of these issues when Swedish, the largest nonprofit hospital in the state, was taken over by Providence last year. And of course, last summer many islanders became alarmed after hearing that Seattle's bishop had asked that PeaceHealth in Bellingham no longer do lab tests for Planned Parenthood patients, a move that would have put patients' health and lives at risk, especially in the event of an ectopic pregnancy where time is of the essence. And even more islanders became concerned when they learned that PeaceHealth was merging with CHI.

So while we can agree that it's troubling so many issues are being raised now, many others and I view the reason for that timing differently. For many years, people trusted Catholic hospitals to provide compassionate care that was substantively the same as secular care. Instead, under an activist clergy, Catholic health care is increasingly diverging from the standard of care advocated by leading health care professionals and from evolving social norms. The American Congress of Ob-Gyns specifically promotes the use of birth control and has said that reproductive decisions belong with a patient and her doctor – a position that the Catholic bishops say is immoral, which I suppose makes the 99% of women who use contraceptives immoral too. So too, must be the 75% of San Juan Islanders who supported the Death with Dignity Initiative.

It is the increasing activism of the Catholic bishops and the aggressive way they are moving to use their control of Catholic hospitals to impose health care policy that has put these issues at the forefront. For anyone to suggest otherwise is disingenuous at best.

If you want to learn more about what really happens behind the scenes when Catholic bishops interfere in health care decisions, I encourage you to read this study, which was released this month by researchers from the University of California, SF and the University of Chicago: <http://blog.ansirh.org/2013/02/pregnancy-in-catholic-hospitals/>

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