

**Religion, Reproductive Health and  
Access to Services:  
A National Survey of Women**

**Conducted for  
Catholics for a Free Choice**

by  
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## Introduction

As health care in the United States continues to evolve, takeovers and mergers involving community and non-religious institutions and Catholic institutions and the influence of Catholic church teachings in health care are growing. Reproductive health services, the extent and type of referrals and counseling given to patients, the filling of prescriptions, and other aspects of health care—especially for women—may feel the impact of religious dictates in medical settings. Catholics for a Free Choice asked Belden Russonello & Stewart to conduct public opinion research to document the views of American women regarding health services that are important to safeguard in this environment. The survey results reported are based on a probability sample of 1,000 women nationwide. Interviewing was conducted from February 22 to March 5, 2000.

## Executive Summary

American women want and expect a wide range of health services to be available to them, regardless of the religious affiliation of the hospitals, pharmacies, or insurance companies they rely on in their communities. Women strongly believe that Catholic religious tenets should not be allowed to influence the kinds of health services that are available. Likewise, women strongly oppose potential legislation allowing hospitals or pharmacists the right to refuse to perform or supply medical services because of religious beliefs.

Large majorities disapprove of hospitals not permitting doctors to provide certain procedures, but they are divided in their opinions regarding a doctor's right to deny services based on the doctor's own religious beliefs.

### **Women's expectations regarding access to reproductive health services in Catholic and community hospitals:**

- The Belden Russonello & Stewart national survey reveals that American women of all religious backgrounds believe that access to health care is a *right* to which all people are entitled.
- If they entered a hospital, many would *expect* to find the full range of reproductive health services regardless of the religious affiliation of that hospital. A plurality of women (45%) say that if they were admitted to a Catholic hospital, they believe they would be able to obtain medical services which may go against Catholic religious teaching.
- They believe a broad range of reproductive health services *should* be provided by community hospitals where they live. Whether or not an institution is affiliated with the Roman Catholic church, the great majority of women want their hospital to offer medically indicated abortions (87%), birth control pills (91%), sterilization procedures (85%) and morning-after pills for rape victims (78%). Nearly six in ten

(57%) want their hospital to provide morning-after pills to prevent any other unplanned pregnancies.

- A smaller percentage-but still half (50%)-expressed a preference for a community hospital that performs elective abortions where the health of the woman is not at risk over a hospital that does not provide this service.

**Insurance:**

- The survey also shows that over eight in ten (84%) women believe their health insurance policies should continue to cover reproductive health care services no matter what the religious affiliation of the insurance company providing them.

**The doctor-patient relationship and exemptions based on conscience:**

- Women are extremely protective of their relationship with their doctors. Three in four (75%) insist that hospitals should not forbid for religious reasons any woman's medical treatment legitimately prescribed by a doctor.
- The survey also discloses broad opposition to any legislation giving hospitals or pharmacists the right to refuse medical services or medication that conflicts with a religious belief (79% hospitals and 83% pharmacists).
- Women are closely divided on whether an *individual* physician should be permitted to deny a patient medical services that violate his or her personal religious beliefs. Nearly five in ten (49%) of the women support such an exemption while 46% oppose it.

**Obligation to refer:**

- Even when a hospital or pharmacy refuses to provide reproductive health services, women say owners of those institutions have an obligation to provide referrals to another hospital or pharmacy where abortions, birth control pills or other services could be readily obtained (88% hospitals and 90% pharmacies).

**Government funding:**

- Over eight in ten (85%) women say in the survey that any Catholic hospital that receives government funds-and almost all do-should be required to provide women's reproductive health services.

### **Guarding against negative impacts of mergers:**

- Nearly three out of four (74%) women would oppose a merger of a Catholic and a non-Catholic hospital if that would mean women were denied reproductive health services. Similarly, 68% of women say they would disapprove if a Catholic institution became the only hospital in their community and prohibited reproductive health services.

### **Differences in opinions:**

- *Catholics:* Even though the numbers are lower than for other women surveyed, a majority (usually a large majority) of strongly religious Catholic women still take the right-to-choice position on all the questions we posed. Two exceptions are the provision of legal abortions in hospitals, which gets support from only 38%, and the exercising of exemptions based on conscience (so called conscience clauses) by doctors, which wins the support of six in ten strongly religious Catholic women.
- *Age:* Middle-aged (45-59) and younger women (18-29 and 30-44) reflect almost identically high degrees of enthusiasm for access to all categories of reproductive health services. Women over 60, meanwhile, also believe in full access to reproductive health services, but by smaller majorities and with lower intensity than younger women.
- *Political party:* Democrats and independents show the strongest support for making sure hospital-based reproductive health services are fully available, and Republican women indicate somewhat less support. But taken together, there are wide majorities for access to women's medical services among all political categories.
- *Socio-economic factors:* Similarly, there is a slight drop-off for wide access to reproductive health services among women who have not been to college and for women whose family incomes fall below \$25,000.

However, these modest differences only emphasize the widespread agreement among all demographic groups that women should have access to women's health care at community hospitals whatever the hospital's religious affiliation.