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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**      **CONTACT: Steve Hopcraft, 916/457-5546;**  
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**Roman Catholic Bishops Order Hundreds of Hospitals, Hospices and Nursing Homes to Ignore Patients' Advance Medical Directives, Force-feed Unconscious Patients Against their Documented Wishes**

The United States Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), through a change in its “Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Healthcare Services,” has ordered Catholic institutions to institute and maintain artificial feeding in permanently unconscious patients, regardless of their advance directive instructions or family wishes. Compassion & Choices, the nation’s oldest and largest nonprofit working for end-of-life care and choice, is alarmed at the impact of this order on Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

The new USCCB mandate, Directive #58, creates “an **obligation** to provide patients . . . medically assisted nutrition and hydration” in all instances except when a patient is actively dying. This instruction replaces the former Directive 58, which merely established a “presumption” in favor of tube feeding, to be overcome when the burden was deemed to outweigh the benefit. But Catholic facilities and providers are now obliged to insert and maintain feeding tubes in all patients who are and will be kept alive by artificial nutrition. Examples include those with severe advanced dementia, permanent unconsciousness and persistent vegetative state.

The revised Directive fails to respect settled law that empowers patients with the right to refuse or direct the withdrawal of life prolonging care, including artificial nutrition and hydration. The United States Supreme Court in the case of [Nancy Cruzan](#) recognized that such a choice is a fundamental liberty guaranteed by the US Constitution. State courts have reached the same conclusion based on State constitutional law and common law.

**The Bishops have demonstrated no interest in patient choices that conflict with their directives.**

In the summer of 2000, Archbishop Justin Rigali of St. Louis forced Steven G. Becker to leave a Catholic hospital in St. Louis and go home to die. Rigali overruled a decision to remove a feeding tube that had been approved by a court decision, advised by the hospital’s ethics committee and requested by Becker’s wife Christie, in keeping with her

husband's wishes. Rigali is now chairman of the Bishops' Committee on Pro-life Activities and participated in crafting the newly adopted language in Directive 58.

[Rigali intervenes: feeding tube must stay](#),

by Pamela Schaeffer, National Catholic Reporter, Oct 20, 2000

“One solution to the issue was offered by John Haas, president of the National Catholic Bioethics Center and consultant to the U.S. bishop's Committee on Pro-Life Activities, which helped draft the new directive along with other groups. He said that if attempts to resolve a conflict over a feeding tube by talking through the issue failed, the patient or their legal guardian are free to seek care elsewhere.”

[Caught in the middle, End-of-life care at issue with new Catholic directives](#),

by Joe Carlson, Modern Healthcare, November 23, 2009.

“And, if she doesn't like the way Catholics do health care, go somewhere else. It's a free country and there are no guards at the hospital doors. And, if there is no other hospital to go to, start one.”

[Intellectual Idiocy #2](#),

Opinion by Catholic commentator Michael Sean Winters, America, The National Catholic Weekly.

### **The scope of the bishops' order:**

- Catholic health care systems and facilities provide services in all 50 states. Services encompass acute care, skilled nursing, hospice, home health, assisted living and senior housing. Catholic institutions include:
  - [624](#) Roman Catholic-affiliated hospitals.
  - [499](#) nursing homes.
  - [48](#) Catholic Health Maintenance Organizations (HMOs).
- [Catholic hospitals employ](#) 525,193 full-time employees and 233,934 part-time workers.
- More than [5.5 million patients](#) were admitted to Catholic hospitals during a one-year period.
- [8 of the top 13](#) non-profit hospital systems in the country are Catholic health systems.
- The Directive conflicts with all advance directives that decline artificial nutrition and hydration in the setting of permanent unconsciousness or advanced dementia.
- Catholic health care is especially concentrated in some states and communities. In certain areas, including many of the nation's poorest, it's the only option.
  - [Over 30% of patients](#) in Washington, South Dakota, Iowa and Alaska are in Catholic hospitals, which are now unable to honor advance directives that decline tube feeding.

- Catholic institutions provide more than [20% of care](#) in Oregon, Montana, Connecticut, Colorado, Wisconsin, Michigan, Minnesota, Kansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Nebraska, Idaho, and, North Dakota.

### **Scope of population the bishops' directive will impact:**

- About [300,000 people](#) receive feeding tubes each year. Roughly 75% are 65 years or older.
- [74% of Americans](#) believe close family members should be the ones to decide medical treatment for a family member who cannot communicate his or her own wishes.

### **Taxpayers pay for health care to conform with USCCB Directives:**

- Religiously sponsored hospitals in the United States bill the government more than [\\$40 billion a year](#), while using religious doctrine to restrict medical care.
- In order to obtain public funding and still place its religious beliefs above the medical needs and individual conscience rights of its patients, Catholic and other sectarian health care providers have sought and obtained [special government accommodations](#) that have permitted these institutions to refuse to provide services they deem morally objectionable, while remaining eligible for public funding.
- Combined Medicare and Medicaid payments accounted for [half the gross patient revenues of religiously sponsored hospitals](#) in 1998. The other half came almost entirely from insurance companies and third party payers, not from churches or other religious sources.

For more information please visit [www.compassionandchoices.org](http://www.compassionandchoices.org)

*[Compassion & Choices](#) is a nonprofit organization working to improve care and expand choice at the end of life. We [support](#), [educate](#) and [advocate](#).*