

Catholic Medical Center

Executive Summary

A Catholic Medical Center leadership team is approached by a well-respected pathologist who believes widespread sterilization is occurring in the hospital.

Background

Catholic Medical Center is a diocesan-sponsored hospital serving a high-crime, low-income urban neighborhood. Many patients are uninsured or underinsured. The Center does operate under the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services (ERDs)* promulgated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The Center's OB/GYN department offers free prenatal care and delivers babies in its maternity ward. However, many patients do not receive prenatal care, contributing to premature births, birth defects, and other complications. In addition, high rates of maternal addiction make postnatal care more challenging for both mother and child.

A well-respected pathologist began receiving OB/GYN specimens labeled with vague descriptions such as "pelvic repair" and "postpartum procedure," and noticed that these submissions were frequent and consistent.

Aware that the Medical Center operates under the Ethical and Religious Directives (ERDs), which prohibit sterilization procedures, the pathologist grew concerned about what the specimens might represent. He reported his suspicions to his supervisor, who then informed the leadership team.

The leadership team launched an investigation, which confirmed that postpartum tubal ligations were being performed. In many cases, no pathology was documented, and the clear intent was permanent contraception. It was also clear that the procedures were requested by patients and informed consent was given by each patient affected.

Under Directive 53 of the Ethical and Religious Directives (ERDs), direct sterilization is not permitted in Catholic health care institutions. However, Directive 53 is not the only ERD guiding the Center's mission. The ERDs also emphasize care for the poor and vulnerable, a commitment to social justice, and respect for human dignity.

Case

Should Catholic Medical Center's leadership end the sterilizations?