

Merger may hurt women

By **PATRICIA A. MCGEOWN AND M. TRACEY BROOKS**

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The announcement of a three-way merger among St. Peter's Hospital, Seton Health System and Northeast Health is big news. Once the merger is operative, Rensselaer County residents will have gone from having three hospitals in the county — two secular and one religious — to having only one that is dominated by adherence to Catholic health directives. While proponents hail the merger as a significant step toward health care reform, we must join many others in questioning how this mega-merger offers improved health for anyone other than the institutions.

Media coverage of the merger has tended to characterize the opposition as only concerned about the decision not to provide abortion services. This is indeed an important issue. Abortion is generally an extremely safe procedure that can easily be performed in an outpatient setting such as a doctor's office or clinic. However, there are occasions when the hospital setting is most appropriate. That option will no longer be available. In fact, it is doubtful that women will even be informed of the option of abortion, much less provided with a referral to an abortion provider. Is this good for the women of Rensselaer County?

But the decision by Northeast Health to adhere to the 72 "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services" and to create a one-floor, separate "hospital within a hospital" to provide services outside the scope of these directives will have a much larger impact. As New York is moving toward community-based, comprehensive health care, why set up two health care systems?

Good health care cannot come from erecting false walls between services. In the case of a tubal ligation, for example, the most convenient and cost-effective time to have this procedure is immediately after childbirth. The least desirable option would be to schedule a separate procedure at a separate facility after a mother has gone home with her newborn.

Is this good for the women of Rensselaer County?

Reproductive health care isn't separate from women's overall health care needs. A woman undergoing cancer treatment in a secular hospital may be advised to use birth control to prevent pregnancy, and patients being treated for sexually transmitted illnesses need to know about the importance of condom use. Would elimination of these services be good for the patients of Rensselaer County?

Based on the Catholic directives, patients seeking primary care from Family Medical Group, one of Northeast's primary health care facilities, might not receive comprehensive health care. Providers could be banned from counseling about or prescribing birth control or providing any contraceptive services. Providers may not even be allowed to refer patients for such services. Is requiring a patient to make appointments with multiple providers good for the women of Rensselaer County?

Last, but certainly not least for the 12,000 employees involved, is the question as to employee health insurance benefits. Following the Catholic directives would mean no coverage for such services as birth control and sterilization. That can equate to considerable expense for employees trying to avoid an unplanned pregnancy.

The creation of a single entity under the authority of the Catholic health directives will impose a culture

on Rensselaer County health care consumers regardless of their religious beliefs or personal values. That culture will limit access to needed information and services. It will create unhealthy walls between services and potentially increase the cost and medical risks for patients — particularly those with limited access to transportation, child care or time off from work.

This is not good for the residents of Rensselaer County. They deserve better. They deserve full information and full reproductive health services.

Anything less is bad for women and substandard health care.

Patricia A. McGeown is president and CEO of Upper Hudson Planned Parenthood. M. Tracey Brooks is president and CEO of Family Planning Advocates of New York State.