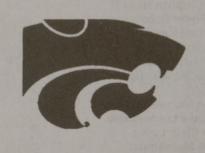
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Friday, April 16, 2004

Catholic hospitals reassur patients after pope's recen feeding tube announcement

By Jim Suhr THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ST. LOUIS — Roman Catholic hospitals are reassuring patients they'll honor living wills in the wake of a papal pronouncement that hospitals should never remove feeding tubes from patients in persistent vegetative states.

In a talk March 20, Pope John Paul II said that feeding and hydrating such patients is "morally obligatory" - and that withdrawing feeding tubes constitutes "euthanasia by omission." Since then, American bishops, theologians and ethicists have been studying the issue closely to see what the pope's words will mean for hospital operations in the United States.

For now, many hospitals are deferring to the "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services" commonly called ERDs outlined by the U.S. Conference on Catholic Bishops.

According to those guidelines, feeding tubes for people in chronically vegetative states are "medical treatment" that can be continued or halted based on the benefits and burdens for patient and family.

Such guidelines call for following directives set out in advance by people who do want life-prolonging medical treatments - as long as the person's wishes don't conflict with Catholic moral teachings, including the church's ban on euthanasia.

The pope's remarks came during a Vatican symposium on caring for people who are incapacitated. They are significant

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Many clinical and ethical policy decisions at Catholic hospitals made in accordance with the religion's moral teachings. There are nearly 6,000 such hospitals worldwide.

Catholic hospitals around the world



encyclical — the Vatican's most authoritative level of teaching, reserved for matters of extreme importance to the church.

"We have to figure out more specifically what he meant and the implications. I think it's too soon to tell; there are a lot of filters to ge hospitals have honored living wills since the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1990 that vegetative patients could be allowed to die if there was "clear and convincing" evidence that was their wish.

In recent years, the issue had been stoked by the Florida rightto-die legal battle over Terri Schiavo, the severely braindamaged woman whose husband wants to have her feeding tube removed against her parents' wishes.

In a so-called vegetative state, patients are awake but not aware of themselves or their environment. The condition is different from a coma, in which the patient is neither but do not carry the weight of an awake nor aware. But both are

states in which the patien tions v devoid of consciousness.

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A vegetative state is con ered persistent if it lasts to than a month. After a year, checke called permanent. Providing food and was

such patients should be con

ered natural, ordinary and m

tional care - not artificial: ical intervention, the pope said "As such, it is mo obligatory" to continue

care, he said. The pope said familia such ill people needed emotional and economic port, so that they can better for their loved ones.

Gerard Magill, execu director of Saint University's Center for Hell Care Ethics and H Sciences, cast the pope's nouncement as "a clarifica a helpful nuance, that is no threat to Catholic health car.

There are people realing into the doomsday scenario, I think they're wrong," he sa

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