

# Catholic hospitals reassure patients after pope's recent 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 not 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 but do not carry the weight of an

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

### Catholic hospitals around the world



SOURCES: 2003 Catholic Almanac; U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

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 go 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 right-to-die legal battle over Terri Schiavo, the severely brain-damaged 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 awake nor aware. But both are

states in which the patient is devoid of consciousness.

A vegetative state is considered persistent if it lasts more than a month. After a year, it is called permanent.

Providing food and water to such patients should be considered natural, ordinary and proportional care — not artificial medical intervention, the pope said.

"As such, it is morally obligatory" to continue care, he said.

The pope said families of such ill people need emotional and economic support, so that they can better care for their loved ones.

Gerard Magill, executive director of Saint Louis University's Center for Health Care Ethics and Health Sciences, cast the pope's pronouncement as "a clarification of a helpful nuance, that is not a threat to Catholic health care."

"There are people who are in the doomsday scenario. I think they're wrong," he said.

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