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President's Page

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President's Page



Problems of Poverty

Happy is he who has regard for the lowly and the poor. Psalm 41:2

At our 1988 annual meeting of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds, Bishop Carl Fisher, SSJ, Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles, spoke so eloquently of the demoralizing, demeaning, and dehumanizing effects of extreme poverty on the poor of our society. We live in one of the most affluent nations in the history of the world, and most of us share in its rewards and benefits. Yet, it is a social and moral scandal that almost 50 million people in this country live in poverty and the number is growing each year. They are the sick, the homeless, the hungry, the chronically malnourished, the unemployed. They have been subjected to deprivation, poor education, and dehumanizing treatment by our social agencies and welfare programs. Their health care is inadequate or totally lacking.

In my own state, approximately one million of our citizens lack any form of health insurance. Medicaid reimbursement is so inadequate that physicians are increasingly reluctant to accept such recipients as patients. Our neighboring state officials estimate that 15 percent of the women of that state giving birth do so without adequate prenatal care. Poor nutrition, poor education, adolescence, faulty conceptions about pregnancy, and chemical abuse make these high risk pregnancies with an increased chance that the babies will be born with problems.

It would seem that, with the richness of the earth and with a better use and more equal distribution of its resources, much of the misery of man

could be eliminated. Possibly, because of His divine awareness of man's fallen nature, our Lord gave us the admonition that the poor always would be with us. From the time of the Roman dole to the massive welfare expenditures of our times, little has been accomplished in changing the plight of the poor suggesting the involved complexity of the problem allowing no ready, quick, pat solutions. Our Lord and our Holy Mother the Church, however, have given us constant admonition to give to the poor and of our obligation to the poor.

As Christian and Catholic physicians, we have been uniquely blessed in that we earn our living doing the corporal works of mercy. However, we can become easily involved in the social and monetary awards of that vocation and neglect our obligation and calling to serve and meet the needs of the poor. Bishop Fisher asked us to pray, as we try to discern and know what our individual responsibilities are to this ministry.

Interestingly, in his inaugural message, Dr. Jack Davis, the 1988 president of the AMA, addressed our obligations to our community and our society in his request that we give a "tithe of time" to meet social needs. At our annual business meeting, the delegates of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds passed a resolution that each Catholic physician give consideration to spending part of his professional career in the medical missions. Such endeavors are necessary, may be heroic, and very important, and I do not mean to mitigate them. However, I propose that as Catholic physicians, our efforts should be on a day to day basis in our dealing with the problems of the poor and here may lie our future accountability as Christians. I do not know what anyone's responsibility may be, but somehow Christ's and the Church's concern for the poor has to be woven into the daily fabric of our lives causing us in our own unique ways to reach out in our medical practices to our impoverished fellow man.

— Donald E. McIntosh, M.D.
President, NFCPG
