

AALFA Clinic: a morally acceptable healthcare provider

By Charles Reinhardt

From the beginning of the Church, Christians have been a part of healthcare. Christ's disciples began their ministry by healing the sick in the name of Jesus, Christianity spread during the great plagues because the Church refused to abandon the sick and suffering, and the work of many different religious orders shaped the hospital system that we have today. Despite such a long history, many Catholics feel lost in our current healthcare system. The lack of moral norms in our society coupled with our technological power over the natural order has created a system in which Catholics must continually be on their guard against pressures to compromise their moral integrity in order to receive health care.



DR. KOBBERMANN

For many Catholic families in the greater Twin Cities area, the escape from this system comes from the AALFA Family Clinic. An independent clinic since 1996, AALFA is in the Minnesota Healthcare Network and provides Catholic families a healthcare option with a pro-life philosophy. The care is unique and to receive it, families are willing to drive from as far as Brainerd to the clinic in White Bear Lake. The Christian foundation of the clinic can be seen in the building itself. Upon entering, patients find themselves in a space that seems like the combination of a health clinic and a monastery chapel. The artwork, comprised of mostly saints and the Blessed Mother, surrounds the patients with images of the Church Triumphant. It reminds the patients that they are not meant only for health in this life but also for Heaven and eternal life. (AALFA Clinic continued on page 3)

AALFA Clinic

(Continued from page 1)

It is not only patients who are willing to make sacrifices to be at AALFA.

Dr. Kathleen Kobbermann, M.D. joined the clinic in December 2008. For the first nine years of her career, Dr. Kobbermann was practicing medicine, as she describes it, as a "typical Catholic doctor." This meant that she drew a hard line on certain moral issues such as abortion but was willing to compromise on other issues. In the early 1990s, she was following the medical trend of prescribing pharmaceutical birth control to women for everything from acne to infertility and she was willing to perform sterilizations. Eventually, and she would say "providentially," she became dissatisfied with the way she was practicing medicine.

"I loved delivering babies and had a great deal of joy in that," explains Dr. Kobbermann. "But I was providing contraception, so big families were the exception, not the rule. Then I was discovering more serious reasons why women should not be on the pill."

Furthermore, through participating in her oldest son's First Communion preparation and an adult faith formation program, she began to come into contact with the Church's teachings on a deeper level and came to a turning point.

"My conscience was coming alive and I began to realize that I had to confront these issues in my life," she relates. "I could not ignore the paradox I was liv-

ing. We either needed to leave the Church or fully live the life of the Church."

It took the Holy Spirit, a friend willing to have a difficult discussion, and a young priest who was able to speak confidently about the "Theology of the Body" to open her eyes to why the Church teaches what it does and, ultimately, to change her practice. She realized the Church is about love and the human person, not a quick fix for every situation.

Deciding to change how she practiced medicine turned out to be only the first step in Dr. Kobbermann's transformation. While she could refuse to prescribe contraception, she needed an alternative to treat the legitimate health problems of her patients. She went to the Pope Paul VI Institute and was trained in NAPRO technology, a set of medical techniques developed by Dr. Thomas Hilgers, M.D. that use the signs of a woman's natural fertility cycle in order to provide care consistent with the teachings of the Church. The change in her practice, however, made her work situation difficult. While she found support in the Catholic community, many of her fellow doctors actively fought against her new methods. She became isolated and realized that she needed to work with like-minded doctors so she could trust her patients to the care of her team members should the need arise. She began searching for a new clinic and, when she found AALFA, she knew she had found her new home.

In addition to Dr. Kobbermann, AALFA physicians Dr. Paul Spencer,

D.O. (the president of the clinic) and Dr. Mary Paquette, M.D. are trained in NAPRO technology. Dr. Paquette splits the week at the clinic with her husband, Dr. Matthew Paquette, M.D. Along with two physician assistants (who have also been trained in NAPRO technology) and Dr. Matthew Anderson, M.D., OB/GYN (who studied the work of Dr. Hilgers), the staff provides comprehensive care for a couple's fertility. The physician assistants educate couples on how to observe and track the signs of their fertility. When most cycles are normal, the physicians are able to identify and correct most cycle complications. For rare, more complicated cases, Dr. Anderson is able to provide other ethical interventions such as surgical procedures. AALFA thus provides a unified system of care that respects the dignity of each person.

It is not surprising that at AALFA the waiting room is continually full of growing families. The practitioners are able to help couples who seek to follow the Church's teaching as part of their primary care. Patients are not pressured to make immoral decisions simply out of conformity to what society has deemed appropriate medical practice. The providers are able to work with a woman's individual body, as it was designed by God, without subjecting her to a catch-all pharmaceutical solution with negative side effects. Furthermore, the techniques work. For couples struggling with infertility, they are three times more likely to achieve a successful pregnancy using

NAPRO technology than if they were to use in vitro fertilization (IVF). Likewise, women treated with these non-invasive techniques consistently find relief from the many other conditions typically treated by the pill. The philosophy of care at AALFA creates a health system that is rewarding for doctors and patients alike.

The world offers no morally permissible option to successfully achieve pregnancy and birth to couples struggling with infertility. They must either compromise the integrity of their marriage through medical procedures such as IVF or choose to live without biological children. Dr. Kobbermann and the other physicians at AALFA offer a third way which seeks to work with the nature of the couple as a man and woman in order to give them the greatest chance of achieving a viable pregnancy. AALFA is not just another healthcare institution. It is an example of how the Catholic Faith and morals should permeate every secular institution. It is the answer to the prayers of both physicians and patients alike who are seeking ways to follow Christ while living in the world.

Charles Reinhardt, a freelance writer from the Twin Cities, has an M.A. in Philosophy from the University of Western Michigan and is currently completing an M.A. in Theology at The Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity.

This article was funded by the St. Bernadette Soubirous Chair of Writing sponsored by Thomas and Barbara Janas.