

Pope to druggists: Shun 'immoral' scrips

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Pope Benedict XVI urged Catholic pharmacists on Monday to use conscientious objection to avoid dispensing drugs with "immoral purposes such as, for example, abortion or euthanasia."

In a speech to participants at the 25th International Congress of Catholic Pharmacists, Benedict said that conscientious objection was a right that must be recognized by the pharmaceutical profession.

Such objector status, he said, would "enable them not to collaborate directly or indirectly in supplying products that have clearly immoral purposes such as, for example, abortion or euthanasia."

In his speech, the pope also said that pharmacists have an educational role toward patients so that drugs are used in a morally and ethically correct way.

"We cannot anesthetize consciences as regards, for example, the effect of certain molecules that have the goal of preventing the implantation of the embryo or shortening a person's life," he said.

Emergency contraception pills, which can be taken up to 72 hours after unprotected sex, work by preventing ovulation or by preventing the embryo from being implanted into the womb.

The pope said pharmacists should raise people's awareness so that "all human beings are protected from conception to natural death, and so that medicines truly play a therapeutic role."

The issue has been debated extensively in the United States.

Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich introduced the rule more than two years ago requiring pharmacists to fill all prescriptions. Pharmacists challenged the rule, and a legal settlement earlier this month allowed pharmacists who object to dispensing emergency birth control to step aside while someone else fills the prescription.

In Washington state, pharmacists have filed a federal lawsuit sued over a regulation requiring them to sell emergency contraception, saying it violates their civil rights by forcing them into choosing between "their livelihoods and their deeply held religious and moral beliefs."

Earlier this year in Georgia, activists called on the Kroger Co. grocery chain to make the so-called "morning after pill" more readily available after a 42-year-old married mother of two from Rome, Ga., complained that a store manager in her hometown told her she could not buy it there because the store's pharmacist refused.

In response, Kroger said it was clarifying its policy and pharmacists who object may ask another employee to sell it.