

Q&A on the Implications of the Vatican Statement on Vaccines for the Catholic Health Ministry

A recent statement commissioned by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and prepared by the Pontifical Academy for Life ("Moral Reflections on Vaccines Prepared from Cells Derived from Aborted Human Fetuses") considers the moral implications of creating and using vaccines derived from aborted fetal tissue/cells. Such a statement obviously has potential implications for the Catholic health ministry. The following Q&A explores some of the possible implications.

Question: Which vaccines are derived from aborted fetal cell lines?

Answer: Though this is not an exhaustive list, the recent Vatican statement says some vaccines for measles (M-R-VAX and Rudi-Rouvax), mumps (Biavax), and rubella (Biavax) as well as the combined MMR vaccine (M-M-R II, R.O.R., Trimovax, and Priorix), hepatitis A (VAQTA and HAVRIX), chicken pox (Varivax), poliomyelitis (Poliovax), rabies (Imovax), and smallpox (AC AM 1000) are derived from fetal cell lines.

In some cases, there are alternatives to these vaccines. Not all alternatives are available in the United States and some have serious side effects. For example, there are no alternatives available in the United States for vaccination against rubella, chickenpox and hepatitis A. There are alternative vaccines for mumps, measles, rabies, poliomyelitis and smallpox. However, serious allergic reactions have occurred from the first three.

Question: Must Catholic health care organizations and the patients they serve avoid using vaccines derived from aborted fetal cell lines?

Answer: Yes and no. If there are two or more effective types of vaccine for a particular virus, and at least one of them is not derived from aborted fetal cell lines, according to the Vatican statement, the Catholic provider and the patient are obliged to use a vaccine that is not derived from aborted fetal cell lines. It is primarily the provider's responsibility to see if alternative vaccines exist.

However, if no alternative vaccine exists, it is morally permissible to use a vaccine derived from aborted fetal cell lines. The Pontifical Council for Life comes to this conclusion because they judge the provider's and recipient's degree of cooperation in the original act of abortion to be "very remote mediate material cooperation," which cooperation may be morally permissible for a proportionate reason. The proportionate reason is the health and safety of individuals and of the general public, in the absence of alternatives.

Question: Do Catholic health care providers and Catholics seeking to be vaccinated have any other responsibilities other than asking for or trying to obtain alternative vaccines when these exist?

Answer: According to the Vatican document, "the faithful and citizens of upright conscience" should express opposition to vaccines derived from aborted fetal tissue and should put pressure on pharmaceutical companies to develop alternatives. The current situation, in the judgment of the Pontifical Council for Life, is unacceptable because it forces parents (and others) to either choose against their conscience or to put the health of their children and of the population as a whole at risk.

Question: May someone ethically refuse to have their child vaccinated with vaccines derived from aborted fetal tissue?

Answer: The Vatican document answers in the affirmative, provided doing so does not cause significant risk to the health of children and the general population.

Vatican Statement on Immunization:

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