

Virginia Pharmacy Latest in National Trend

Nonprofit 'Ministry' Won't Dispense Contraceptives

BY VICTOR GAETAN
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CHANTILLY, Va. — With families, photographers and pharmacists looking on, Bishop Paul Loverde of Arlington, Va., moved slowly around the Divine Mercy Care Pharmacy in Chantilly Oct. 21, sprinkling holy water.

The Arlington, Va., bishop blessed the new facility on its second day of operation.

"This pharmacy is a vibrant example of our Holy Father's charge to wear our faith in the public square," said the bishop. "It will allow families to shop in an environment where their faith is not compromised."

Divine Mercy Care Pharmacy refuses to dispense contraceptives. Pharmacists for Life International certified it as a pro-life pharmacy — the seventh in the nation — and said hundreds of others probably pursue a pro-life policy without that certification.

Nonprofit 'Ministry'

The pharmacy is run as a nonprofit "ministry." Although the facility is not directly affiliated with the Catholic Church, local parishes have been helpful in trying to assure its success, said Bob Laird, executive director of Divine Mercy Care, the nonprofit entity that owns the pharmacy and Tepeyac Family Center, a pro-life obstetrics-gynecology practice that was founded 14 years ago in nearby Fairfax.

Some 50,000 Catholics live in the area around Chantilly, which is close to Dulles International Airport. Located in a strip mall with two other pharmacies, Divine Mercy Care Pharmacy is counting



GOOD CARE. Dr. John Bruchalski (l), founder, with Bob Laird, executive director, of Divine Mercy Care, at the opening of the pro-life pharmacy in Chantilly, Va. Courtesy DMC Pharmacy

on drawing the faithful.

"We see people coming unusual distances, even 10 miles away, because we are pro-life," explained Laird, a retired nuclear engineer for the Army and father of five who served as the family life director of the Arlington Diocese. "Normally, clients will not drive more than two miles from home for a pharmacy."

By drawing a dedicated clientele, the business can make up for the financial loss of not filling contraceptive prescriptions, which constitutes about 10% of a typical pharmacy's business.

Divine Mercy Care is also guided by Church teaching on the essential dignity of each person and the need to help the poor. It subsidizes the

cost of prescriptions for the elderly and the needy.

"We have three main tenets guiding this business and a related pro-life family medical practice: first, to run a good business, excellent in all ways; second, to be faithful to the Catholic Church; and third, to feed the poor," said Laird.

He continued, "All three are important and done simultaneously. We don't wait to make money and then help the poor, for example."

Divine Mercy Care is the "funding engine" for both entities, Laird noted. "Charity cases receive full service like anyone else. Then, the pharmacy and practice bill Divine Mercy Care, which works to raise money for this need."

ally gave me his support.

"As a pharmacist, I knew there were about 10% of my clients using contraceptive products for non-contraceptive reasons. So was I going to interrogate people to decide who I could sell to? It became a business decision to simply pull those products off my shelves, instead of spending a lot of time deciding how to distribute them," Koelzer concluded.

He said it was a relief to become a pro-life pharmacy: "It was such a weight off my shoulders. It gave me such peace."

Although there are about 100 pharmacies within a 10-mile radius, Koelzer's experience proves that going pro-life does not have a negative impact: His business has grown to 25 employees.

Increasingly, Koelzer is speaking around the country on creating successful pro-life businesses as part of his "pro-life pharmacy apostolate" (online at ProLifePharmacy.com).

Promoting Life

But not all pharmacists who express pro-life commitments have had positive experiences. Neil Noesen was reprimanded by the state of Wisconsin after he refused to fill a college-age woman's prescription for birth control pills while working at a Kmart pharmacy there in 2002.

A state appeals court upheld the sanctions against Noesen earlier this year, requiring him to take a continuing education class on ethics.

"Wisconsin is not a 'free state,' because pharmacists have no choice regarding filling contraceptive prescriptions," said Noesen, who moved to Illinois as a result of his ordeal. He now works in a pharmacy that allows him to follow his conscience. "I hope we see more demand for pro-life pharmacies, which is a

very exciting development," he said.

Sylvia Dorham, a Catholic mother of eight who attended the Divine Mercy Care Pharmacy opening, is thrilled to have the new facility available.

"Being a pro-life person, I want to have pro-life health care and not have to be standing in line behind someone who is getting a product that might be harming a child: for example, the morning-after pill."

Dorham is involved with Pro-Health Natural Fertility, an organization that seeks to start pro-life medical practices in the Baltimore area and elsewhere. Supporters are collecting signatures from Catholic women in order to demonstrate to potential pro-life doctors that there's a market for such practices.

She hopes Divine Mercy Care Pharmacy will inspire others. Said Dorham, "It's a fabulous accomplishment."

"This is such a noble concept. Seeing this pharmacy up and running, filled with children, attended by a bishop wearing his miter, I was filled with happiness. It's a great example of the divine meeting the practical."

Victor Gaetan is based in Washington, D.C.

INFORMATION

Pro-Life Pharmacies

For more information, check out:

■ PFLI.org is the website for Pharmacists for Life International; certified pro-life pharmacies are listed on the site.

■ DMCPHarm.com describes Divine Mercy Care Pharmacy, its products and services.

■ KayPharmacy.com is the site for the Grand Rapids, Mich.-based pro-life pharmacy.

■ ProLifePharmacy.com is an advocacy website run by pharmacist and speaker Mike Koelzer.