

CATHOLIC BISHOPS OF NIGERIA VISIT HEALTH MINISTER

By
Dr. Emmanuel Okechukwu

A delegation of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) led by the Chairman of its Church and Society Committee and Bishop of Umuahia Diocese - Most Reverend (Dr.) Lucius Ugorji - paid a scheduled advocacy visit to the Honouable Minister of Health - Prof. Christian Onyebuchi Chukwu at the Federal Secretariat, Abuja on February 21, 2013.

According to Bishop Ugorji, the visit was to explore concrete ways of collaboration and partnership between the Federal government and the Catholic Health Services as well as other non-state actors in the health care delivery subsector. This was important given the historical contributions of the Catholic Health Services in the development and delivery of health care in Nigeria. For instance, the Catholic Sacred Heart Hospital in Abeokuta was the first standard hospital established in Nigeria in 1895.

With about 500 Catholic clinics, hospitals and rehabilitation centres in addition to hundreds of health outposts across the country, the Church's health facilities are found or functioning through outreach activities in almost every community in Nigeria including the rural and urban slum settlements; reaching the "unreached". In fact, the Catholic Health Services is the single largest provider of health care after the government, offering about 40% of health care in the country.

The Catholic Bishops submitted that faith-based health systems provide complementary and supportive interventions to the social service responsibilities of governments at various levels. Theirs humanitarian, universally-accessible health care services reach to all Nigerians, especially citizens at the margins of society – the poor, disadvantaged, persons with disabilities, the aged, the abandoned and those with stigma conditions (lepers, HIV/AIDS and teenage pregnant girls, etc. Accordingly, there are compelling grounds for constructive engagement with them to assure universal health coverage for all Nigerians.

Currently, however, there exists no policy framework which reckons with the substantial contributions by faith-based entities and non-governmental organizations to the health system of the country; no Funding Window for delivering predictable support to mission and not-for-profit organizations which offer health care services to Nigerians. Many countries in Africa are already implementing different forms of collaboration with mission health systems including payment of staff salaries, staff secondment, equipment supply and technical assistance.

Furthermore, the Catholic Bishops Conference advised that the National Health Bill and all other initiatives of government should recognize and respect the moral, religious and cherished cultural values of the Nigerian peoples. They requested that education and services in Natural Family Planning (NFP) methods be included in the disbursement plan of the budget already allocated for family planning commodities to provide everyone choice, based on their religious belief or health conditions. Also, consultations should be opened

with the National Assembly for a legislation to establish formal frameworks for providing budgetary subventions to non-state actors in health care delivery, especially in the rural and non-profitable spheres.

In his response, Prof. Onyebuchi Chukwu acknowledged the enormous contributions of the mission health services to the Nigerians across ethnic and religious bridges, and thanked the Catholic bishops for the visit. He enthused that such interactions enrich and add value to the work of the Ministry. According to him, collaborations were already in place with faith-based entities, but more could still be achieved. He was also impressed by the submission of the Catholic Bishops at the recently-held Senate public hearing on the proposed National Health Bill, with expectations that their recommendations were being taken seriously by the National Assembly. He directed that Natural Family Planning methods are to included in the on-going national family planning programmes.



Prof. Chukwu flanked by Bishops Ugorji (L) and Umoren (R), CBCN delegates and FMOH directors

Other members of the CBCN team were: Most Reverend Anselm Umoren (auxiliary bishop of Abuja), Fr. Evaristus Bassey (Director, Church and Society), Dr. Emmanuel Okechukwu (Health Secretary), Rev. Sr. Regina Tombere (Family and Human Life Secretary) and Dr. Lydia Obute (Salus Trust, HMO Manager).

In attendance were also the Federal Ministry of Health (FMOH) directors for Public Health, Family Health, Hospital Services and the Technical Adviser to the Minister.