

# HOW RELIGION IN THE MEDIA PORTRAYS REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN SECULAR STATES: ROMAN CATHOLIC AGENDA-SETTING IN PHILIPPINE BROADSHEETS

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## ABSTRACT

*A media agenda-setting study was conducted to measure how a dominant religion within a secular country influences the portrayal of reproductive health in newsprint media, using Roman Catholicism and the Philippines as a case study. A content analysis of eighty-one reproductive health stories from January to June 2008 were analyzed for topic, inclusion of Catholic reference (yes or no), and position (pro-life, pro-choice, pro-life and pro-choice, or no position). A purposive sample of newspapers was chosen according to percent readership in the Philippines. Family planning (32.0%) and HIV/AIDS/STIs (16.0%) were the most frequently covered reproductive health topics. Approximately half (50.6%) of all stories included a Catholic reference to illustrate the topic. Of the stories that included Catholic references, the largest single position was pro-life (41.4%). Articles including Catholic references in the news format, a prime agenda-setting location, were found to have a higher proportion of stories positioned as pro-life. Results suggest that a dominant religion within a secular country can influence the portrayal of reproductive health issues in broadsheet media.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Reproductive health, Roman catholic, agenda-setting*

## INTRODUCTION

The sphere of religious influence has not been limited to their institutions. Many religious ideologies have seeped into contemporary public health issues, especially those pertaining to reproductive health (RH). Strong religious convictions have the ability to influence RH policy-level decisions. Within the international arena, the Roman Catholic Church, which is the only religion to have been granted state privileges to speak and vote at United Nations conferences, has continuously used its fervour to limit the development of reproductive choice for women (Cook & Dickens, 2003; Plichtová & Petrjánošová, 2008). For countries with an official state religion, it has been conventional to shape laws and social norms concerning RH with religious interpretations (Obermeyer, 1994). Egyptian law is founded on the most conservative interpretation of Islamic texts in the Qu'ran, prohibiting abortion unless there is risk to a women's life (Seif El Dawla, 2000). In principle, the Qur'an condemns the killing of humans but is not explicit about abortion. In a more liberal interpretation of Islam, Saudi Arabia permits abortion within the first 120 days after conception (argued as the time before a fetus receives a soul) (Alkuraya & Kilani, 2001).

Contrary to states with an official religious faith, secular countries are presumably neutral in matters of religion. Nonetheless, religious convictions can still influence RH policy making in countries where a dominant religion exists. The United States, a secular yet predominantly Christian country has drawn on its dominant religious values to shape its role in global health. Former US presidents who were devoutly Christian have in the past restricted foreign aid to international NGOs engaged in abortion-related activities (van Dalen & Reuser, 2006). In the secular yet predominantly Catholic country Spain, the Church has also been successful in securing influence over Parliament to dismiss legal approaches towards liberalizing abortion (Fleishman, 2000). Similarly, in the Philippines, strong opposition from the Catholic Church has outlawed abortion even in case of rape or to save a women's life (Mello, Powlowski, Nañagas & Bossert, 2006).

The effort to insert religion into RH policy necessitates active promotion and advocacy on the part of religious representatives. Logically, media outlets are excellent venues for this. In countries with an official state religion, the portrayal of RH is presumably biased in the context of religious ideologies. However, the extent to which dominant religious ideologies influence the debate on RH issues, and manifest itself in the media to sway political opinion in secular countries is less clear.

The implications of using broadsheets as an outlet of information to the public are significant. Newsprint coverage has been shown to influence health-related decisions (Li, Chapman, Agho, & Eastman, 2007; Andrist, 1998), and precede policy decisions (Sato, 2003). For this reason, the portrayal of RH issues in newsprint media can have the potential to set public agenda and possibly influence how policy makers make RH-related decisions.

The House of Representatives in the Philippines is currently gearing up for a crucial reading on a new reproductive health bill. The bill, which includes provisions for publicly-funded contraceptives and sex education, faces strong opposition from the Catholic Church which has a strong social and political influence in the country (H.R. Bill 5043, 2008). In a recent statement to the media, the executive director of the Bishops-Legislators Caucus of the Philippines was quoted saying, "this bill dares to violate the Catholic faith, and we are a Catholic country. You can't imagine an Islamic country bringing in a law against the Islamic faith" (Bland, 2008). The portrayal of RH in the media may be drawn towards a religious perspective by reporters who try to provide a "balanced" account, but who live in a country where Catholicism permeates Filipino culture. Consequently, extreme judgements in the media may have the potential to affect policy ratification in a secular country. This paper uses the Philippines as a case study to further understand how a dominant religion can influence the portrayal of RH in newspaper media. The study aims to quantitatively measure the salience of Catholic depictions and positions of RH through a content analysis of newspaper articles, and discuss its potential in setting the public agenda, and influencing RH policy-making in a secular country.

## BACKGROUND

### Religion and Reproductive Health in the Philippines

In the Philippines, where over 82% of Filipinos are Roman Catholic (NSO and ORC Macro, 2004), religious concerns surrounding RH and family planning have affected population policy. The country's population initiative is an example of the tug of war between secularity and religion. In 1971, a law was first introduced prescribing the government's role and duty to control population growth in the country (Rep. Act No. 6365, 1971). However, government efforts to curb fertility have faced strong opposition by the Catholic Church and have been ineffectual: the population in 2007 was over 88 million and growing at an annual rate of a little over 2% (NSO, 2007). The country has also experienced an increased incidence of induced abortion, which is in part due to the social difficulties women face in obtaining modern method contraceptives (MMC) in a predominantly Catholic country (Juarez, Cabigon, Singh & Hussain, 2005).

While there exists a secular provision in the present Constitution for married couples "to found a family in accordance with their religious convictions and the demands of responsible parenthood" (Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines Art. XV Sec. 3, 1987), the country's high fertility rate has been attributed to a low use of MMC rooted in the Catholic Church's opposition to family planning in the policy making process (Herrín, Orbeta, Cuenca, del Prado & Acejo, 2003; Mello et al., 2006). Former presidents have been open to various MMC in accordance to the provision (Population Council, 1997). However, current president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has said in the past that her standpoint on population is the same as that of the Catholic Church. Accordingly, she opposed direct national funding for MMC, and initiated a phase-out plan of donated contraceptives from United States Agency for International Development (USAID, 2003; David, 2003). Without a federal or centralized plan for providing family planning methods, contraceptive accessibility and affordability has become inequitable across the country.

The decentralization of health services has created further inequities in reproductive health. In 1991, the Local Government Code (Rep. Act. No. 7160, 1991) devolved the responsibility of health services from the national

level to local government units (LGUs) (Bossert & Beauvais, 2002). Although the Department of Health retained its authority in setting general health guidelines, national funds were transferred to LGUs with broad spending discretions. This has allowed many LGU officials to exercise their own policies regarding what RH services are funded (Mello et al., 2006). For some LGUs, this has been detrimental to the provision of RH services. In 2000, the former mayor of Manila issued an executive order in line with his Catholic beliefs banning MMC from all public health clinics to promote "responsible parenthood". Consequently, many Filipinos traveled to other LGUs for reproductive health services, or obtained none at all (Tan, 2004).

### Agenda-Setting Function of the Media

The media serves as a significant source of health information to the general public (Martinson & Hindman, 2005) and, specifically, news print has consistently been found to be an effective and useful channel for health communication (Nishtar, Mirza, Jehan, Badar, Yusuf, & Shahab, 2004; Pelletier, Duclos, Daly, & Kerbel, 1998; Entwistle, 1995). Consequently, it has been theorized that the media influences *what* readers think about by setting the public agenda. Whereas most research on the agenda-setting function of the media have focused on voting behavior and attitudes toward political candidates, the theory is now increasingly being broadly applied to health (Pierce, Dwyer, Chamberlain, Aldrich, & Shelly, 1987; Hacker, 1996; Sato, 2003). Research has suggested that agenda-setting in broadsheets can affect public attitudes on various health issues such as smoking and organ donation (Clegg Smith, Wakefield, Terry-McElrath, Challoupka, Flay, Johnston, Saba, & Siebel, 2008; Feely & Vincent, 2007).

The origins of agenda-setting theory initially focused on the salience of *objects*, which is now referred to as first-level agenda-setting. Objects are issues or topics, and are defined as the things that readers develop an attitude or opinion about. Objects have *attributes*, which are the traits that describe them, or shape our understanding of the object. In this study, for example, an RH issue such as *family planning* is the object, and the Catholic narrative used to frame the object is the attribute. Some attributes in the media are emphasized while others are ignored or reduced to minor mention. The salience of attributes in the media is referred to as second-level agenda-setting. Whereas the media tells us what objects to think about in first-level

agenda setting, it also tells us *how* to think about objects by attaching attributes to them in second-level agenda-setting (McCombs, 2005). Attributes have two dimensions: cognitive and affective. Cognitive attributes are the descriptions that depict the object, or ‘paint’ its picture for the reader. Affective attributes are the positions or tones taken on the object (i.e. positive/negative/neutral) (Kim & McCombs, 2007). In this study, for example, the Catholic narrative is the cognitive attribute, and the *pro-life/pro-choice* position of the article is the affective attribute.

### Agenda-Setting by Organized Religion

Organized religion can play a significant role in setting the public agenda among its followers. Many religious denominations are major publishers of books and are active in magazine and newspaper media. In turn, their specialized agendas can shape the way adherents think about issues and influence the way they make health-related decisions. In the Philippines, Roman Catholic advocates frequently advocate the health risks of taking contraceptives to dissuade Filipino families from using MMC (CBCP News, 2008). In a national survey of married Filipino women who were not currently using birth control, the top two reasons for not using contraceptives following “wants children” (14.5%), were “has health concerns” (14.3%) and “fears side effects” (14.2%) (NSO and ORC Macro, 2004).

Religion can also set the political agenda by dissuading politicians to vote against policies that are in conflict with their religious morals. Resistance from the Catholic Church towards passing ordinances for publicly-funded MMC is one example (Mello et al. 2006). In turn, the Philippines have experienced an unmet need for family planning (15.3% and 19.7% in urban and rural Philippines respectively) (NSO and ORC Macro, 2004).

### Pro-Life and Pro-Choice Meanings in the Context of the Philippines

The dichotomy of *pro-life* and *pro-choice* is a commonly used framework in RH discourse. Unique to each society, the definition of both terms are shaped by social and historical conditions. In the United States, each definition is equated with liberty and individual rights. Whereas the *pro-life* position believes that the fetus is a living individual entitled to protection under the law, the *pro-choice* position asserts that a woman has a right

over her own body and the ability to choose whether to continue or terminate her pregnancy (Johnsen, 1986; Tan, 2004). Although comparable to the United States, the definitions of pro-life and pro-choice in the Filipino context are different, uniquely shaped by its Spanish colonial history and the introduction of Roman Catholicism. The Roman Catholic faith strongly opposes abortion and its influence in the country has shaped both pro-life and pro-choice meanings distinguishing itself from the western definition. In the Philippine context the pro-life position which supports natural family planning opposes abortion and MMC, both considered to be abortifacient. Similarly the pro-choice position also objects to abortion, but debates the abortifacient nature of MMC and supports the couple who uses them to control their family size (Pagunuran, 2008; Youngblood, 1998).

### **Broadsheet Readership in the Philippines**

Broadsheet readership in the Philippines is 12% in Metro Manila and 9.4% in Urban Philippines (Philippine Media Factbook, 2007). With significant readership, newsprint media can be an important resource to increasing public awareness on health-related issues. Newspapers are frequently cited as being a main source of information, and sometimes a primary source of health information (Al-Almaie, 2005; Pan, Wu, Hsu, Yao, & Huang, 2002; Ndlovu & Sihlangu, 1992). Broadsheets act as an effective channel of RH information to the public in the Philippines. About 40% of women ages 15-49 are reached with family planning messages through print media. Additionally, printed media were most often cited by Filipino women as the main exposure to family planning messages in Cordillera Admin Region and Eastern Visayas (NSO and ORC Macro, 2004).

## **METHODS**

### **Agenda-Setting Measures**

A content analysis measured first and second-level agenda-setting attributes in the media used to communicate RH in three major Philippine newspapers. *The Content Analysis Guidebook Online* was used as reference to conduct the content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002). The objects of this study were RH sub-topics. This measured what issues the media compels readers to think about with respect to RH. To measure how the media influences

readers to think about RH issues, the frequency of the cognitive attribute of Catholic reference, and affective attribute of being pro-life, pro-choice, pro-life and pro-choice, or no position were recorded and analyzed.

### Newspaper Sample

A purposive sample of the top three broadsheet newspapers in the Philippines was used. According to the Association of Accredited Advertising Agencies Philippines 2007, the three daily newspapers with the most readership and circulation are: *Philippine Star*, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, and *Manila Bulletin* (Philippine Media Factbook, 2007). A business newspaper, *Business Mirror*, was also included for comprehensiveness. All are printed in English.

### Topic Sample

RH articles that ran between January and June 2008 in the selected broadsheet newspapers were examined from an archive of health stories collected by Health Action Information Network (HAIN). Stories that pertained to health were physically cut out by staff and sorted according to month. Of all the health stories collected between January and June 2008, this study examined only those stories that pertained to RH. The definition of *reproductive health* used to identify RH was according to the Philippines NGO Council on Population Health and Welfare Inc. The *10 Elements of Reproductive Health* are *adolescent reproductive and sexual health, family planning, infertility, maternal and child health, men's involvement in reproductive health, prevention of gynaecological problems, prevention and treatment of the complications of abortion, sexuality education and counselling, STIs and HIV and AIDS, and violence against women* (Philippine NGO Council on Population, Health and Welfare Inc., n.d.).

Prior to selecting the final topic sample, a pilot study using all RH stories from December 2007 was made. The purpose of the pilot study was to develop a coding instrument, estimate the distribution of RH topics, and to test the methodology of the study. As a result of the pilot test, the topic sample for the coding instrument was expanded to two more codes: *sexuality & sexual health*, and *general reproductive health*. Complete definitions of codes were developed following the pilot.



### Coder Selection and Training

The primary researcher and a research assistant coded an equal number of articles. A five-hour training session by the primary researcher prepared the research assistant who holds a BA in Communication to manually code stories.

### Coding Protocol

The coding protocol included 10 items within three sections. The *General Section* included publication details such as coder identification, article number, article date, article title, newspaper, and article format. A 15-word article summary was also included in the section to focus coders on the topic (Hayes, Ross, Gasher, Gutstein, Dunn, & Hackett, 2007). The *First-Level Agenda-Setting Section* contained items of reproductive health topics to select. Stories were coded according to reproductive health topic descriptions. The *Second-Level Agenda Setting Section* contained cognitive and affective attributes. Coders coded stories conclusive for the cognitive attribute if stories discussed, referenced, or mentioned Catholic ideologies to describe, or frame the topic issue. Articles were further coded for the affective attribute into pro-life, pro-choice, pro-life and pro-choice, or no position using the common usage of these terms in the Philippine context.

A sample of 10 articles (12% of all stories) was drawn and coded by the primary researcher and research assistant to develop a measure of inter-coder reliability. Cohen's kappa coefficient (Cohen, 1960) was used to measure the agreement between coders. Reliabilities for reproductive health topics, cognitive attribute, and affective attribute were 0.68, 0.72, and 0.70 respectively.

### Limitations

There are several limitations to this study, which are derived from the procedures of data collection. The study only analyzed stories between January and June 2008, which may not have been a long enough time period to generalize conclusions. Stories in the news media tend to be specific to a time period and fluctuate in topic depending on recent events. The short duration of the study however, may have underestimated the impact. In the

months following June 2008, there was increased media attention on the reading of the bill in the House of Representatives, which may have increased the coverage of RH in broadsheets.

The study measured agenda setting solely by counting the frequency of objects and attributes regardless of their original location in the newspaper, or contributing author. The original placement of the articles was unknown for the reason that they were previously cut out of the broadsheet and filed. In some articles such as commentary or columns, there were regular authors who consistently wrote on the same issue and held the same view. This study did not adjust for the contribution of regular authors, but focused on the crude rate of first and second-level agenda setting. Qualitative differences such as speech, interviews or images of RH articles were not recorded. Therefore, the lack of this data may not capture the overall impact a story has on its reader.

## RESULTS

### First-Level Agenda Setting

Eighty-one articles were included in the final analysis. The two most frequently cited RH topics were *family planning* (32.0%), and *HIV/AIDS/STIs* (16.0%) (see Table 1). The most frequent type of article format was *news*, followed by *column* (see Table 2).

### Second-Level Agenda Setting

All stories were coded for the inclusion of a Catholic cognitive attribute. Of the 81 articles, 41 contained a Catholic reference to describe RH issues. Articles containing this attribute were separately analyzed for an overall position. Of the articles that contained the cognitive attribute, the majority were positioned as pro-life (41.4%), followed by pro-choice (34.1%), pro-life and pro-choice (19.5%), and no position (4.87%) (see Table 3).

Second-level agenda setting attributes were further analyzed according to story format. The proportion of articles that included a Catholic cognitive attribute to frame RH stories according to format were *letter to editor* (100%), *column* (68.7%), *news* (43.3%), and *feature* (28.5%) (see Table 4). Articles containing this attribute were further analyzed for position.

Representations of pro-life and pro-choice positions were found in all story formats with a significant proportion (47.8%) of news articles being positioned as pro-life (see Table 5).

**Table 1. Frequency of reproductive health topics**

Topics	Percentage (of total)	Total
Adolescent reproductive & sexual health	2.46	2
Family planning	32.0	26
Infertility	-	-
Maternal & child health	9.87	8
Men's involvement in reproductive health	2.46	2
Prevention of gynaecological problems	6.17	5
Prevention and treatment of the complications of abortion	4.93	4
Sexuality education & counselling	8.64	7
STIs & HIV & AIDS	16.0	13
Violence against women	-	-
Sexuality & sexual health	12.3	10
General reproductive health	4.93	4
Total	100	81

**Table 2. Frequency of article format**

Article Type	Percentage (of total)	Total
News	65.4	53
Feature	8.64	7
Column	19.7	16
Letter to Editor/Opinion	6.17	5
Total	100	81

**Table 3. Frequency of position for stories including cognitive attribute**

Position	Percentage (of stories including cognitive attribute)	Total
Pro-life	41.4	17
Pro-choice	34.1	14
Pro-life and Pro-choice	19.5	8
No position	4.87	2
Total	100	41

**Table 4. Story format by presence of Catholic cognitive attribute**

Story format	Percentage (with Catholic cognitive attribute)	Total
News	43.3	53
Feature	28.5	7
Column	68.7	16
Letter to the editor	100.0	5
Total	-	81

**Table 5. Story format by position for stories with a Catholic cognitive attribute**

Story format	Pro-life	Pro-choice	Pro-life and Pro-choice	No position	Total
News	47.8	13.0	30.5	8.7	23
Feature	50.0	-	50.0	-	2
Column	27.2	72.8	-	-	11
Letter to the editor	66.7	33.3	-	-	5
Total	-	-	-	-	41

## DISCUSSION

This study quantitatively measured the frequency of RH topics and their religious framing to examine how a dominant religion might influence the debate on RH issues through its manifestation in newsprint media. This is the first time a study has measured agenda-setting attributes of religion in broadsheet health articles. Moreover, this is the first study to measure these attributes in the context of Roman Catholicism and RH.

The media has the power to choose which topics reach the public. In turn, the media has been suggested to influence what the public perceives are the day's most pressing issues (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Newsprint, therefore, are crucial to the public construction of reality regarding the importance of a country's RH issues by making some issues more salient than others. One way the media highlights selected topics is by publishing a greater quantity of stories on the issue.

In this study, *family planning*, *HIV/AIDS/STIs*, and *maternal and child health* were the most frequently covered RH topics in the archive of news articles. The health challenges of the country continue to be family planning, HIV/AIDS awareness, and maternal and child health (NSO and ORC Macro, 2004). Therefore, what the media are conveying people to think about are aligned with what the government perceives are the RH problems of the country, and are making the public agenda. This relationship, however, should not be considered close and direct. There may be other reasons as to why the media are making these issues more salient. Family planning, HIV/AIDS/STIs, and maternal and child health are also topics complicated with morals of Roman Catholicism, the country's largest religious denomination. Being in a country with a dominant religion, the media may be reporting RH according to what the Church believes is important as opposed to the government since Catholicism is so pervasive in Filipino culture. These issues may also be receiving more awareness for the reason that they are associated with the controversial Reproductive Health and Population Development Act.

News media are ultimately driven by what sells, and the sensationalism of Catholic morals in conflict with liberal movements in RH may be driving how RH stories are portrayed. This *health hype* phenomenon described by Signorielli (1993), asserts that mass media are driven to

publish stories according to what sells and entertains. To capitalize on this, the media may be dramatizing the religious debate by narrating RH with Catholic frames. In this study, approximately half of all articles contained a Catholic cognitive attribute, suggesting that Catholic references are frequently employed by the media to frame RH issues to the Filipino public.

Including Catholic frames can lead to the highlighting of strong religious opinions, such as the pro-life stance. A larger proportion of articles that included Catholic narratives were positioned as pro-life. In addition, all pro-life stories originated from articles that included a Catholic cognitive attribute, suggesting that the pro-life debate in broadsheet media is derived from the religious perspective.

Another way the media makes issues salient is by arranging stories in the news article format. A news article is a late-breaking layout of information, usually found on the first page of a newspaper. Therefore, it can be the first, and sometimes the only article someone reads, making it a prime agenda-setting location within broadsheets. The majority of RH stories in this study were featured in this format, suggesting that RH is accurately being kept on the public agenda according to what the government perceives are the country's RH problems. Upon analysis of this format, it was also found that nearly half of all news articles employed stories with Catholic narrations. In addition, a higher proportion of these stories were positioned as pro-life. This relationship may also be confounded with the business of media. News articles are usually one of the first stories readers see and has the potential persuade the reader to continue or discontinue reading. Therefore, the media may be trying to attract readers by capitalizing on the sensationalism to make a profit.

The salience of any Catholic framing in the media is significant. The media has the potential to set the public agenda by influencing what RH issues people think about and how they think about them. Although it appears that the media is precisely reporting an unbiased account of what RH issues are important, the Catholic perspective is an active player in framing of RH discourse. Consequently, the media who try to present an objective account may be biasing readers to understand RH in the context of Catholicism, highlighting it as a moral issue.

## CONCLUSION

### Religious Agenda-Setting in Secular State Policy Making

Secularity is the state of being separate from religion. Despite countries who officially declare secularity, if a dominant religion exists, it can still act to influence the debate and potentially, set public agenda and the policy-making process. The media is one channel through which religion can disseminate and potentially sway a politician's opinion, especially on RH policy. By narrating RH articles with Catholic frames, politicians may come to believe that RH is always associated with religious taboo themes and be similarly inclined to treat them as taboo or outlawed. Despite a country's secularity, politicians may also be inclined to overlook the secular law and develop or pass policies according to what is favourable to the stand of the Catholic church. Consequently, there can be serious consequences for the public when policy makers are swayed by religious perspectives. Politicians have the ultimate say on broad policies that affect a citizen's well-being. In the case of RH policy, this could mean a negative impact on access to essential RH services.

It is assumptive to suggest that the content of news stories directly influences public and policy opinion on RH. Like the majority of agenda-setting studies, this study does not examine RH newsprint content or the attitudes of its readers. This study however, should be used as preliminary data to inform and guide future research. Findings suggest that a significant portion of RH articles carry a Catholic cognitive attribute, and that when stories carry this attribute, overall pro-life positions become more pronounced. It would be informative to know how much Catholic framing of stories is indeed influencing the public agenda and public perceptions of RH, as well as possibly RH policy. In this case, it would be interesting to examine the trends in RH newspaper articles and correlate them with public opinion or stages of administrative policy-making.

Despite the Philippines' secularity, religion and religious affiliation continue to play a role in the policy-making process. Currently, the Reproductive Health and Population Development Act is undergoing a second reading at the House of Representatives. Many public service officials must choose to support or reject this bill. In a country with a history of tug

of war between religion and secularity, any slight advantage in media advocacy could have the potential to sway a policy maker's decision. Although Philippine newsprint media report pro-life and pro-choice opinions, harsh criticisms toward liberal movements in RH by the Catholic Church are frequently published. In a statement regarding the RH bill, the Catholic's Bishop Council of the Philippines referred to the proposed RH bill as "anti-life" (CBCP News, 2008, para. 1). Nevertheless, there are legitimate, moral issues surrounding abortion and contraception that deserve attention. However, consistent references to Catholicism and its moral position could act to set the political agenda, ultimately limiting the citizens of a secular country from making an informed decision regarding their own health.

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