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HEALTH

Obama Administration Approves Rule That Guarantees Near-Universal Contraceptive Coverage

Guest Blogger on Jan 20, 2012 at 11:46 am

Guest blogger is Jessica Arons, Director of the Women's Health and Rights Program at American Progress.

Today, in a huge victory for women's health, Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius announced that most employers will be required to cover contraception in their health plans, along with other preventive services, with no cost-sharing such as co-pays or deductibles. This means that after years of trying to get birth control covered to the same extent that health plans cover Viagra, our country will finally have nearly universal coverage of contraception.

Opponents of contraception had lobbied hard for a broad exemption that would have allowed any religiously-affiliated employer to opt out of providing such coverage. Fortunately, the Obama administration rejected that push and decided to maintain the narrow religious exemption that it initially proposed. Only houses of worship and other religious nonprofits that primarily employ and serve people of the same faith will be exempt. Religiously-affiliated employers who do not qualify for the exemption and are not currently offering contraceptive coverage may apply for transitional relief for a one-year period to give them time to determine how to comply with the rule.



Twenty-eight states already require employers, including most religiously affiliated institutions, to cover contraception in their health plans. The only change is that now they must cover the full cost.

Family planning results in better health outcomes for women and their children—a woman who has a planned pregnancy is more likely to be in better health when she gets pregnant and more likely to seek prenatal care, and children who are born at least two years apart are healthier. Family planning is also the most effective tool we have in reducing unintended pregnancy and the need for abortion.

An expanded religious exemption would have created an unreasonably large loophole that would have kept these benefits beyond the reach of millions of women. This decision honors the conscience of these women over that of the institutions that employ them and ensures that cost will no longer be a barrier to accessing basic and essential preventive health services.

UPDATE

"The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is promising a legal challenge" over the new rule, Kaiser Health News reports. "There really is no change," said Sister Mary Ann Walsh, director of media relations for the bishops. "What has been announced is that they are going to delay an enforcement. It's as if they said 'We'll give you a year to figure out how to violate your conscience.'" The bishops' group "will fight this edict; they have no choice but to fight this edict," she said.