

Free contraception ruling hijacked by culture warriors

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Last month, the Obama administration issued a ruling that most health insurance plans must cover contraceptives for women free of charge.

By removing cost as a barrier to birth control, the contraception rule has been hailed as an important victory by women's rights advocates and by experts in the public health community. It represents a huge win for millions of low-income women who are currently unable to afford birth control. The ruling has also engendered equally strong backlash from religious leaders and congressional Republicans intent on fueling the flames of our ongoing culture wars.

New private health plans written on or after August 1, 2012 will be required to provide coverage for the full range of contraceptive drugs and devices approved by the Food and Drug Administration with no out-of-pocket costs to patients. If a woman's employer is a charity or hospital that has an objection as a part of its policy, then her insurance company will be required to offer her contraception coverage.

The new federal rule builds on a key provision of the 2010 health reform law requiring insurers to cover broad categories of "essential benefits," including coverage of preventive services recommended by federally-sponsored committees. The ruling on contraceptive coverage also relies on recommendations for preventive health care services for women contained in a recent report from the Institute of Medicine, "Clinical Preventive Services for Women: Closing the Gap."

The IOM report recommends complete insurance coverage – without copays or cost sharing above a monthly premium – for a number of preventive services, including lactation counseling and equipment, domestic violence screening and counseling, screening for gestational diabetes, human papillomavirus testing as a part of cervical cancer screening for women over 30, counseling on sexually transmitted infections and HIV, and, importantly, all FDA-approved birth control methods and counseling for "women with reproductive capacity."

In developing its recommendations, the IOM considered current science and the existing literature on preventive measures and services shown to improve women's ability to avoid unwanted pregnancies and to space their pregnancies in order to promote optimal birth outcomes. The administration concurred with the IOM, noting that we now have "abundant evidence that birth control has significant health benefits for women and their families, it is documented to significantly reduce health costs, and is the most commonly taken drug in America by young and middle-aged women."

Coverage, public opinion

It is important to note that 28 states, including Nevada, already require insurance policies that cover prescription drugs to also cover all FDA-approved contraceptive drugs, devices, and related medical services. Nevada is one of eight states that include an “expansive” refusal clause that does not exempt any employers but allows religious insurers to refuse provide coverage. As such, the new federal rule essentially requires new plans to offer the same contraception coverage currently provided by most employer-sponsored health plans and the Federal Employees Health Benefits program.

It’s likewise worth pointing out that the ruling is consistent with the views and practices of most Americans. Over 99 percent of all women and 98 percent of all Catholic women have used at least at least one contraceptive method. Nearly two-thirds of the 60 million plus women of childbearing age in the US are currently using some form of contraception.

On a similar note, national polling consistently finds that a vast majority of Americans, including majorities of Republican and Catholic voters, support women’s access to contraception. A recent poll conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute found that a majority (55 percent) of Americans agree that “employers should be required to provide their employees with health care plans that cover contraception and birth control at no cost.” The same poll found that 58 percent of Catholics believe that employers should be required to provide their employees with health care plans that cover contraception.

Culture wars and the public’s health

Leaving aside what is already covered in most health plans and contraceptive practices supported by most Americans, the administration’s ruling is ultimately a health matter grounded in our best understanding of preventive measures that support women’s overall health. Currently, 49 percent of all pregnancies in the US are unplanned and unintended pregnancies are associated with a litany of well-documented poorer health outcomes for both mothers and children.

Like most issues associated with the new health reform law and its implementation, though, the administration’s contraceptive coverage ruling has not escaped the ire of culture warriors and congressional Republicans keen on energizing their base in an election year. Kaiser Health News reporter Mary Agnes Carey notes that the contraception coverage ruling “is simply another opportunity for Republicans to talk about what they hate about the law” and unify their base.

As we grapple with the complexities of implementing insurance coverage expansions and reigning in health care costs, we should be doing everything in our power to reduce the public health burdens and costs of unintended pregnancies and preventable disease and disability.

Coverage of preventive services for women, including contraception, takes us an important step in that direction.

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