

Obama administration appeals ruling on emergency contraceptives

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On Wednesday, the Obama administration filed an appeal to an April 5 US District Court ruling which sought to end all age restrictions for access to the so-called Plan B emergency contraceptive pill. The appeal was filed just a day after the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) lowered the age for purchasing the contraceptive from 17 to 15.

This is the second time the Obama White House has intervened to restrict the availability of the emergency contraceptives. In an unprecedented move in December 2011, Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Kathleen Sebelius overruled an FDA recommendation that would have allowed the drug to be sold over the counter with no age restrictions.

Obama personally defended that decision, which required women 16 and younger to have a doctor's prescription before obtaining Plan B One-Step, produced by Teva Pharmaceuticals. (See "Obama administration blocks access to emergency contraception for young women") Wednesday's appeal of the district court ruling further highlights the Obama administration's pandering to the religious right, anti-abortion activists, the Catholic Church and their reactionary views.

The principal effect of the Plan B emergency contraceptive is to prevent ovulation, but it may also make the uterine wall less receptive to a fertilized egg, an effect that is common to many hormonal and intrauterine contraceptives. It cannot terminate an existing pregnancy, and it is not to be taken as a regular birth control pill. For the anti-abortion zealots who contend that life "begins with conception," however, the emergency contraceptive is an "abortion" pill that must be opposed at all costs.

Placing restrictions on over-the-counter access to the emergency contraceptive is an affront to the

constitutional and reproductive rights of all women of reproductive age. The drug must be taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex to be most effective, and works best when taken as soon as possible. Any restrictions requiring younger women to obtain a prescription for its use will limit both access and effectiveness. The need to keep the product behind pharmacy counters limits its availability to hours when the pharmacies are open and has led to other difficulties in obtaining the pill.

The Guttmacher Institute reports that more than 7 percent of girls aged 15 to 19 and nearly 4 percent of girls ages 15 to 17 became pregnant in 2006. The report also showed that a significant number of girls who had previously never had a sexual encounter were also a large part of those numbers. Teenage pregnancy changes the entire course of a young girl's life, leaving her with fewer educational and job opportunities. Teenage mothers have also been shown to lack skills such as patience, maturity, and the ability to handle stress, which are vital for successful parenting.

The FDA decision made prior to the appeal approved over-the-counter sales to women and teenagers aged 15 years and older. Previously, Plan B was only available by law to women and teenagers 17 years of age and older and only then with a prescription. Federal District Court Judge Edward Korman ruled on April 5 that this law was "politically motivated, scientifically unjustified, and contrary to agency precedent." He gave the administration 30 days to file an appeal.

The administration is fighting against the ruling by stating that the court's decision interferes with the scientific nature of the FDA's approval process. However, the FDA previously concluded in 2011 that the pill is safe for use by women and girls of all ages without consulting a doctor.

The Obama administration's struggles against court rulings that call for access to contraceptives are indicative of an extreme cave-in to the religious right. This correlates with aspects of Obama's health care bill, which allows a wide range of institutions affiliated with religious groups to opt out of covering contraceptives in their employee health care plans. President Obama also signed an executive order upholding a ban on any federal funds being used to finance abortions under the health care legislation.

Cecile Richards, president of the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, condemned the White House's latest move, stating, "We continue to believe that the administration should lift all unnecessary restrictions to emergency contraception, consistent with the prevailing science and medicine."



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