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Students lobby for access to 'morning-after' pills

By Erica L. De Pompeo, Capital News Service
 02/03/2004

—Medical students usually spend their time on such subjects as anatomy, pharmacology and surgery. But some also devote time to political science: they seek to influence public policy on such health care issues as women's reproductive rights.

That is what Sally Hanson, a second-year student at Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Medicine, was doing at the Capitol last week. She is leading a fight against proposed legislation that would ban emergency-contraception pills from the state's public universities and colleges.

"As future medical doctors, we feel that there is absolutely no need for excessive legislation regulating the private decisions between physicians and their patients," Hanson said in a speech on Pro-Choice Lobby Day Jan. 28.

Hanson and dozens of other female students from Virginia colleges rallied at the Capitol in opposition to bills that would prohibit clinics at the state's institutions of higher education from dispensing such "morning-after" pills as Plan B to students.

Two Republican delegates are sponsoring the bills: Robert G. Marshall, of Loudoun and Prince William counties, and Kathy J. Byron, of Bedford and Campbell counties. The legislation has been assigned to the House Committee on Education.

Marshall and some other abortion opponents consider the pills a form of abortion. They also say the pills promote irresponsible sexual behavior.

Last April, Marshall wrote a letter to VCU President Eugene Trani asking the university to stop distributing Plan B.

Hanson said it would be a "huge step backward" to prevent students from obtaining the prescription. Students said the pills prevent unwanted pregnancies, especially for women who have been victims of date rape and other sexual assaults.

The morning-after pill is a federally approved drug that can be taken up to 72 hours after intercourse.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration classifies the pills as a contraceptive. They work the same way as birth control pills but in a higher dose by inhibiting ovulation, implantation and fertilization of the egg.

At VCU, Student Health Services dispenses Plan B, along with literature describing how it works, to students about 200 to 250 times annually. Betty Reppert, the services' associate director, has said, "Plan B is not considered an abortion drug as far as any legal issues are concerned."



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The Family Foundation of Virginia disagrees. The Richmond-based organization supports banning emergency contraception for college students.

"Nearly 80 percent of Americans believe that human life begins at fertilization," said Victoria Cobb, the foundation's director of legislative affairs. "So-called 'emergency contraception' prevents the implantation of an already fertilized egg, a human being with unique DNA. This is an abortion."

In Hanson's appeal to legislators, she said, "If you truly are dedicated to decreasing unwanted pregnancies and abortion ... make emergency contraception available."

"We need to face facts," Hanson said. "Many college students are sexually active. Even with the use of contraceptive methods, accidents happen. Condoms can break, women can miss pills, some women are sexually assaulted."

Last week's rally drew students from schools across the state, including the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech and James Madison University. They said access to emergency contraception is a personal matter in which legislation has no place.

Hanson belongs to a group called Medical Students for Choice. It is a nonprofit organization of more than 7,000 medical students from across the United States and Canada. The group works to make reproductive health care, including abortion, a part of standard medical education and residency training.

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