

POLICY & PRACTICE

U.S. Family-Planning Director Resigns

Dr. Eric Keroack, who was appointed as director of the Office of Population Affairs at the Department of Health and Human Services in November 2006, recently quit his post after action was taken against him by the Massachusetts Office of Medicaid. In a statement issued on March 29, Dr. John O. Agwunobi, Health and Human Services assistant secretary for health, said he accepted Dr. Keroack's resignation as a result of the action but did not provide further details. Dr. Keroack, who oversaw the Title X family-planning pro-

gram, was widely regarded by abortion rights advocates as being against birth control and sex education. In the aftermath of his resignation, abortion rights advocates called on the Bush administration to replace him with someone who understands the benefits of access to birth control and family-planning services.

Court Upholds Abortion Procedure Ban

The U.S. Supreme Court last month narrowly upheld the controversial ban on so-called partial-birth abortions, marking the first time the court has forbidden a specif-

ic abortion procedure. The 5-4 decision said that the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act, approved by Congress in 2003, does not violate a woman's constitutional right to an abortion, even though it does not contain an exception to protect the health of the mother. "The law need not give abortion doctors unfettered choice in the course of their medical practice," Justice Anthony Kennedy wrote for the majority. In separate statements, National Right to Life applauded the ruling, while Planned Parenthood Federation of America noted that with the decision the high court took away an important option for physicians. The American College of Obstetricians

and Gynecologists had filed an amicus brief supporting those challenging the law.

FDA Under Fire From Right on Plan B

Food and Drug Administration officials once again have been accused of playing politics over the issue of emergency contraception. This time, it's not women's health advocates who are doing the complaining, but the conservative-leaning public interest group Judicial Watch. The organization filed a lawsuit last month against the FDA, seeking access to any communications between agency officials and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) related to Plan B. In a court filing, Judicial Watch stated that it sent a Freedom of Information Act request to the FDA seeking those records in August 2006, and receipt of the request was acknowledged a few days later. However, as of March 2007, the FDA had failed to produce the records. The group is asking the court to compel the FDA to produce the correspondence records. Judicial Watch sought the records last summer after Sen. Clinton threatened to block the nomination of Dr. Andrew von Eschenbach as FDA administrator. The group pointed out that in the same month Sen. Clinton threatened to hold up the nomination, the FDA approved the sale of Plan B without a prescription for women aged 18 years and older. "The FDA's decision to approve Plan B seemed more about politics than science especially given the role of Hillary Clinton in the process," Judicial Watch President Tom Fitton said in a statement.

Planned Parenthood Rates Pharmacies

Planned Parenthood Federation of America Inc. recently rated the large national pharmacy chains on their policies for stocking and distributing emergency contraception. The group gave nine pharmacies a "thumbs-up," indicating those chains that had a 100% record on stocking emergency contraception and ensuring patients' access without discrimination or delay. Among those chains getting a thumbs-up is Wal-Mart Stores Inc., which only last year began stocking emergency contraception at all its pharmacies. However, Wal-Mart continues to keep in place its conscientious objection policy, which allows a pharmacist who is uncomfortable dispensing emergency contraception to find another employee to complete the sale. The ratings are based on surveys returned to Planned Parenthood by the top 50 national pharmacy chains. Planned Parenthood gave two pharmacy chains—Target Corp. and Winn Dixie Stores Inc.—a "thumbs-down" for their policies, indicating either that these chains refused to define their policies or that their policies failed to provide patients in-store access without discrimination or delay.

Penalized by High-Deductible Plans

High-deductible health insurance plans discriminate against women by leaving them with far higher out-of-pocket health bills than men have, according to a study from Harvard Medical School, Boston. "Even common, mild problems like arthritis and high blood pressure make you a loser in a high-deductible plan," said Dr. David Himmelstein, study coauthor and an advocate of a single-payer system.

—Mary Ellen Schneider

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