

Women want health care, not politics

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BY DAVID GREENBERG
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

Two weeks ago, we witnessed what happens when politics is placed ahead of health care.

The Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation allowed right-wing bullies to influence its decision to withdraw funding for breast screening services at Planned Parenthood. Women all over the country were outraged. More Americans rallied behind Planned Parenthood than at any point in our organization's 100-year history. Thankfully, Komen reversed its decision.

Last week, led by a carefully coordinated plan developed by Roman Catholic bishops, the political attacks on women's health care continued. The Obama administration had decided to include birth control as a part of basic, preventive health care meaning that contraceptives would have to be made available to women through their employers' health insurance plans, without co-pays or deductibles. Under pressure from the bishops, former White House senior adviser David Axelrod first suggested that President Obama might reverse his decision to ensure that all women, regardless of their employer, have access to birth control. And then the President announced that his administration would make an "accommodation" permitting employees whose employers refuse to cover birth control to still receive contraceptives. He proposed doing this through insurance plans in what are called "side benefits" covered by the insurance companies rather than the employer.

Several bills were introduced in Congress that would prevent women from getting free birth control, not just from religious organizations, but also from any employer that didn't want to provide this coverage. The Rubio-Manchin Bill would even overturn Oregon's 2009 Access to Birth Control Act that requires Oregon's insurance plans to cover contraceptives.

Confused? That's what happens when we mix politics and religion with health care.

With all the problems facing us, it is puzzling that access to life-saving cancer screening and birth control are occupying so much of our attention. 2011 saw a record number of attacks on reproductive health care, with more than 1,100 bills introduced by

lawmakers, of which 135 were enacted. This was a 75 percent increase over 2009. We are now witnessing a campaign against women's health waged under a politicized banner of "religious freedom".

Most Americans believe that access to birth control is a basic human right. Contraceptive use is nearly universal in the United States, with 99 percent of all sexually experienced women and 98 percent of sexually experienced Catholic women using birth control at some point in their lives. The typical woman spends 30 years trying not to get pregnant.

This is a commonsense issue for women — but not for anti-birth control politicians or the Catholic bishops. And it's also an issue of social justice. The cost of birth control is one reason poor women are more than three times as likely to end up pregnant unintentionally as more affluent women.

The Affordable Care Act already included a comprehensive refusal provision: 335,000 churches and church associations nationwide are exempt. What's at the heart of the current political battle is the Catholic-affiliated health care system, where one in six Americans go for health care, and hundreds of thousands of workers are employed. These systems receive hundreds of millions of public dollars every year for providing health services, and they should not be allowed to refuse services to their own employees, or any patient who may or may not share their religious beliefs.

Efforts to protect birth control coverage are about the nurses, secretaries, janitorial staff and other employees of all faiths who work at universities and hospitals, and don't want to lose their benefits. People don't want employers cherry-picking what's covered by their health insurance.

This benefit would not require that anyone personally dispense or use birth control. Many Catholic-affiliated hospitals and universities already provide contraceptive coverage to their employees. And religiously-affiliated insurance companies such as Providence Health Plan do include contraceptive coverage in many of their insurance plans. These institutions are in line with their supporters, because 58 percent of Catholics believe that employers should be

required to cover contraception at no cost to the employee.

It's simple: All women should have access to free contraception no matter where they work or whether they work at all.

This common sense and popular idea means that millions of women who would otherwise pay \$15 to \$50 a month will have access to affordable birth control, saving them hundreds of dollars each year while allowing them to plan their families.

In our community Planned Parenthood serves 60,000 patients each year with annual exams, pap tests, breast exams and other life-saving cancer screening services, counseling, birth control, testing and treatment for STDs, vasectomy and early abortion care. Most patients coming to our 11 health centers receive services at no charge, and we have sliding-scale discounts for everyone. A full list of services and health center locations are available at www.ppcw.org or by calling (503) 788-7273.

The Obama accommodation announced last week seemed like a good compromise.

Women will get birth control, and the Church-affiliated hospitals and universities won't have to pay for it. But the struggle to provide basic, preventive health care for women isn't over. Some members of Congress, most Republican presidential candidates and the Catholic bishops are still trying to take away contraceptives from women.

In our community, people don't want politics or religion getting in the way of health care. For women everywhere, birth control is basic health care. It shouldn't be attacked. And just like cancer screening, it shouldn't be politicized.

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The Face of Youth Being Arrested in D.C.

By Mike Hastie

You wonder where it is all leading to. You wonder how much longer the Police State is going to get away with everything.

The innocence of youth in America is getting more and more disillusioned with the future of their lives.

Eventually, that innocent face will turn to hopeless resentments that will no longer trust any generation that came before them.

"The Road," is becoming more traveled. America has become the thousand yard stare.

The U.S. Propaganda State has become high on everything.

The most profound realization I had when I came back from Vietnam, was that I was the enemy in Vietnam.

I was still young then, but that innocent face I took to Vietnam was battered and

beaten by the previous generation of Americans who said they loved me. That political incest betrayal took me to a padded cell nine years after I got back from Vietnam.

When I went back to Vietnam in 1994 to make amends to the Vietnamese people, I found my soul again.

I followed my path, and it led to the truth. I was born in America, but my heart is Vietnamese.

The youth in America will have to find their way back home, and that path will force them to become a citizen of the world.

It is the last thing the political elite in America want them to discover.

Betrayal is like having a lifelong mentor turn on you and become your worst enemy.

That enemy still lives inside of you, and in order to survive, you have to outgrow the lies that once defined your life.



Photo by Mike Hastie, taken at a demonstration near The White House.