

HEALTH MATTERS

No Cost Birth Control on Horizon

Benefit could come with new health care law

(AP) -- Fifty years after the pill, another birth control revolution may be on the horizon: free contraception for women, thanks to the new health care law.

That could start a shift toward more reliable — and expensive — forms of birth control.

A panel of experts advising the government meets this month to begin considering what kind of preventive care for women should be covered at no cost to the patient, as required under President Barack Obama's overhaul.

Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., author of the women's health amendment, says the clear intent was to include family planning.

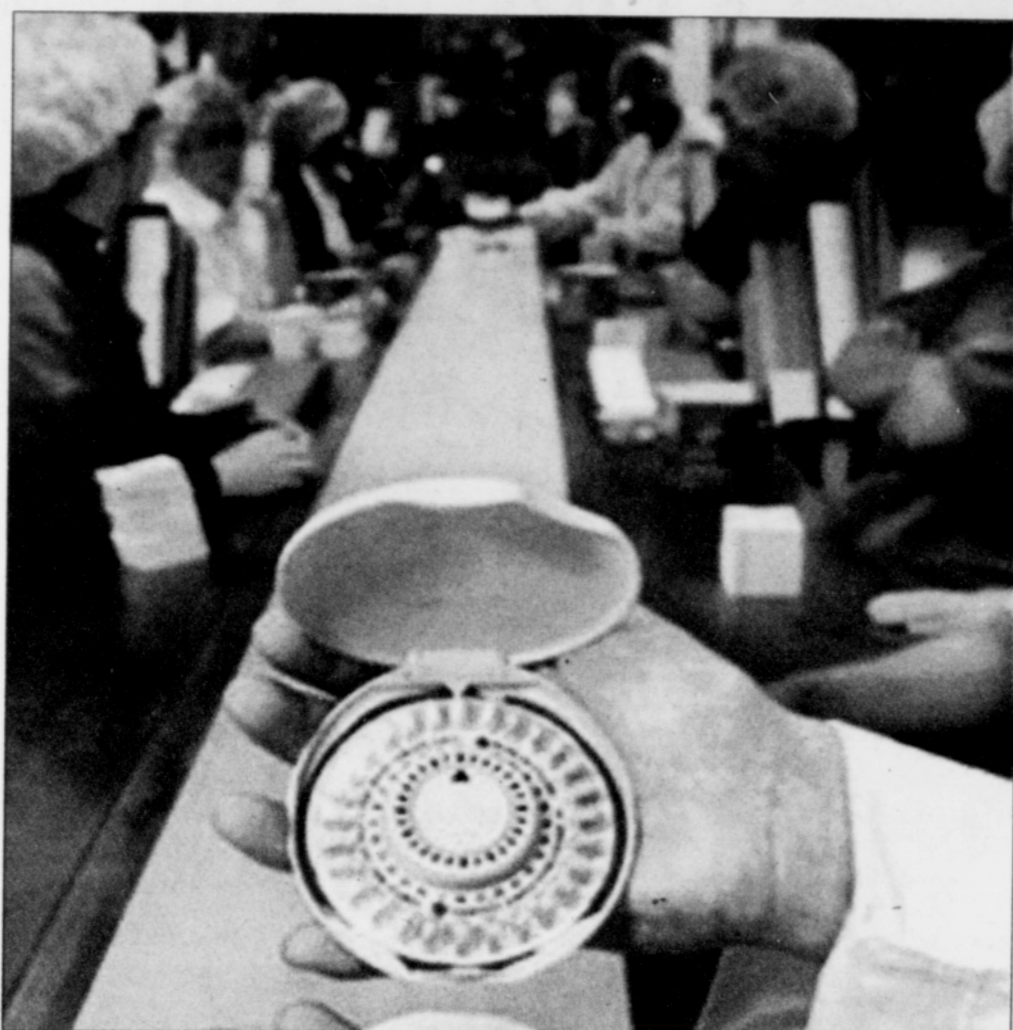
But is birth control preventive medicine?

Conflicting answers frame what could be the next clash over moral values and a health law that passed only after a difficult compromise restricting the use of public money for abortions.

For many medical and public health experts, there's no debate.

"There is clear and incontrovertible evidence that family planning saves lives and improves health," said obstetrician-gynecologist Dr. David Grimes, an international family planning expert who teaches medicine at the University of North Carolina. "Contraception rivals immunization in dollars saved for every dollar invested. Spacing out children allows for optimal pregnancies and optimal child rearing. Contraception is a prototype of preventive medicine."

But U.S. Catholic bishops say pregnancy is a healthy condition,



A birth control pill container designed to look like a woman's makeup compact is displayed at the manufacturer's assembly line.

not an illness. In comments filed with the Department of Health and Human Services, the bishops say they oppose any requirement to cover contraceptives or sterilization as preventive care.

"We don't consider it to be health care, but a lifestyle choice," said John Haas, president of the National Catholic Bioethics Center, a Philadelphia think tank whose work reflects church teachings. "We think there are other ways to avoid having children than by ingesting chemicals paid for by health insurance."

As recently as the 1990s, many health insurance plans didn't even cover birth control. Protests, court cases, and new state laws led to dramatic changes. Today, almost all plans now cover prescription contraceptives. So does Medicaid, the health care program for low-income people.

Alcohol Most Harmful Drug

(AP) -- Alcohol is more dangerous than illegal drugs like heroin and crack cocaine, according to a new study.

British experts evaluated substances including alcohol, cocaine, heroin, ecstasy and marijuana, ranking them based on how destructive they are to the individual who takes them and to society as a whole.

Researchers analyzed how addictive a drug is and how it harms the human body, in addition to other criteria like environmental damage caused by the drug, its role in breaking up families and its economic costs, such as health care, social services, and prison.

Heroin, crack cocaine and meth-

amphetamine, or crystal meth, were the most lethal to individuals. When considering their wider social effects, alcohol, heroin and crack cocaine were the deadliest. But overall, alcohol outranked all other substances, followed by heroin and crack cocaine. Marijuana, ecstasy and LSD scored far lower.

Experts said alcohol scored so high because it is so widely used and has devastating consequences not only for the general public.

When drunk in excess, alcohol damages nearly all organ systems. It is also connected to higher death rates and is involved in a greater percentage of crime than most other drugs, including heroin.



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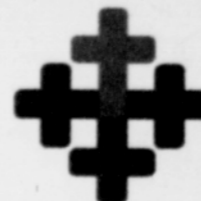
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