

Pro-Choice Oregon dispenses information to pharmacists about emergency contraception

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

NARAL Pro-Choice Oregon is the first among state advocacy groups to put together a project to dispel misconceptions about emergency contraception, and to make those forms of contraception available whenever they are necessary for women 18 and older.

The statewide project started in 2005, two weeks after Pro-Choice Oregon Executive Director Michele Stranger Hunter came west from similar advocacy work in Massachusetts. She received a phone call from a woman who asked not to be identified.

The woman told Hunter this story:

"I am a mother of two who has had four miscarriages. At my last doctor's appointment, my doctor recommended that I have a prescription for emergency contraception filled — just in case — as another pregnancy could be dangerous for me."

When her husband stopped by to pick up the prescription, "there was a new pharmacist on duty. She came around the corner and told him that, although the prescription was filled, she refused to sell it to us because she objects to all forms of contraception.

"Then she began to lecture my husband, within clear earshot of other pharmacy patrons. ... It seems that this female pharmacist does not believe that I am making a 'wise decision' even after consulting with my personal Ob/Gyn."

She went on to tell Hunter that her worry was not so much for herself, because she had the means and knowledge to go elsewhere for the prescription, but, said Hunter, she was worried about young girls who don't have opportunity, means or knowledge.

A "young girl's whole life can be changed in that one brief encounter," the woman said.

"Within 48 hours," Hunter said, "we had called a press conference."

The pill form of emergency contraception, also known as the "morning after" or the "day after" pill, "is a birth control pill with a short-term higher dose," said George Gerding, a Portland-based, semi-retired consulting pharmacist. He is a former member of the state Board of Pharmacy.

"You can do the same thing by taking several birth control pills at once," Gerding said.

Gerding is part of a team that Pro-Choice Oregon has recruited to ensure that emergency contraception is available when needed.

Also joining forces with Pro-Choice Oregon is Don Downing, a clinical professor at the University of Washington School of Pharmacy, who has talked to "close to 20,000" pharmacists in 25 states.

He rounds up groups in many different and creative ways — seeking particularly to talk to those who have elected not to provide the product — about "What do we know? And what don't we know? (about emergency contraception). What are the myths? And let's talk about them," he said.

Downing has been active in Oregon, reaching out to the state's more



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Above, George Gerding, right, and pharmacist Sherry Barrett, pharmacy manager at Bi-Mart in Monmouth, talk about the emergency contraceptive Plan B at the store's pharmacy on Monday, April 5. Gerding is a pharmacist, consulting for NARAL Pro-Choice Oregon Foundation, educating health care providers about Plan B. Spirit Mountain Community Fund contributed \$5,000 to the foundation in 2007 and the money was put towards emergency contraceptive education. At left, Bi-Mart pharmacy manager Barrett displays the emergency contraceptive Plan B.



Editor's note: This is the fifth in a monthly series of stories in 2008 by *Smoke Signals* that will showcase the real-life effects of Spirit Mountain Community Fund donations. Since its inception in 1997, the Community Fund, the philanthropic arm of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde, has donated more than \$40 million to groups in 11 western Oregon counties. These stories focus on the good work those generous Tribal dollars do within nearby communities and the effect they have on people and programs.

than 800 pharmacists. He explains that this pill does not stop a pregnancy. It prevents fertilization from taking place.

Downing begins by asking pharmacists how many are opposed to emergency contraception, said Pro-Choice Oregon's Political and Field Director Laura Taylor. Typically, 20 percent to 30 percent raise their hands. He tells them to keep their hands up and asks that group, "How many have had a woman call and say, 'I've forgotten to take my pill?' And they keep their hands up. Then, he says, 'How many have recommended that they double up on their birth control pills for a few days?' They all keep their hands up. So, then he tells them, 'You've just dispensed emergency contraception. It works the exact same way.'"

The Copper-T Intrauterine Device is also used to prevent pregnancy on an emergency basis.

For Pro-Choice Oregon, Downing gives the group presentations and Gerding follows up to see if the information has been digested.

The groundwork for the project that started in Lane County last year came from Spirit Mountain Community Fund's \$5,000 contribution in 2007.

On May 9, the Community Fund board was reviewing Pro-Choice Oregon's most recent request for \$25,000 to continue to expand the pharmacist-to-pharmacist program across the state.

In Lane County, 41 of 67 pharmacies stocked emergency contraception before the Pro-Choice Oregon training began, and 45 stocked it afterwards. Sixteen pharmacists gave some bad information before training, and six dispensed some bad information afterwards, according to information provided by Pro-Choice Oregon.

Emergency contraception has been studied since the 1960s and controversy has followed. In the 1970s, Arkansas made it legal for pharmacists to decline to deliver a prescription for abortions or emergency contraception. Three other states have followed in the years since.

On the other hand, seven states have policies requiring pharmacies to provide the medication, and seven other states have policies prohibiting obstruction to providing it.

Downing convinces most pharmacists about the ethical soundness of emergency contraception. Anecdotal reports indicate that a small number of pharmacists in Oregon, where the policy prohibits obstruction, continue

to decline to fill emergency contraception prescriptions based on their beliefs about right-to-life issues.

These pharmacists come out in sharp relief in small, rural communities where there may be only one pharmacy, and a long way to the next one.

Oregon Right to Life, for example, reported last year in its *Life in Oregon* publication online, "Pro-lifers oppose the use of the drug (emergency contraception) because it can cause an abortion in some circumstances."

To Downing, this is one of a number of pieces of misinformation coming out of both sides on the issue. "We absolutely know that it does not cause an abortion," he said. "Abortion is something legally and medically defined. A lot of people say, 'Well, we don't like that definition.'"

From the left, he said, we hear that "emergency contraception is known to decrease, in a community-wide way, unintended pregnancy and abortion rates. We don't have anything that supports that."

The amount of misinformation is a lot smaller now, and the Pro-Choice Oregon project to make that number zero continues to educate.

"Most who refuse (to provide emergency contraception) haven't read the literature," Downing said. "Frankly, they have listened to the media, their neighbors, basing it off misinformation. And given access to good information, they frequently change their minds."

"The real joy of doing all this work in Oregon is you give them facts, they change their minds and they dramatically improve access. And that's encouraging." ■