

“Public Health Need for Improved Contraception”

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As one of the oldest and largest reproductive health providers in the country, Planned Parenthood Federation of America has a strong interest in ensuring that women have easy access to safe, effective, and affordable contraception. One of the key problems that we face in assisting men and women prevent unintended pregnancy is the lack of innovation and improved technology in contraceptive research and methods. The United States has the highest rate of unintended pregnancy of any industrialized country. In fact, the rate of unintended pregnancy was even higher than the number of planned pregnancies in 1983. Our United States unintended pregnancy rates are more than double the rates for Canada and Great Britain.

Unintended pregnancy remains a serious problem in the United States. Although the birth control pill has been available for forty years, and other innovations in contraception have been introduced in the past several decades, *most pregnancies are still unintended in the United States*. The last major introduction of a new contraceptive method was Depo-Provera in 1992. American women need safe and accessible birth control, and they need more options that are affordable for those without health insurance or with insurance that does not provide coverage for contraceptive care.

In 1998, 1,848,106 women visited Planned Parenthood health centers, seeking contraception. Of these women, 12.6% were interested in non-prescription barriers. There are important benefits to contraception that can be obtained without a prescription. While birth control methods such as the pill, Norplant or Depo-Provera involve one or more visits to a health

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care provider, the vaginal sponge appealed to women with busy schedules and accessibility issues because it could be bought over-the-counter at a local pharmacy.

In a recent study published in *Family Planning Perspectives*, 19% of Missouri women surveyed reported that it was "hard...to get time off work or school to go to [a] clinic," while 25% said that they would be more likely to use birth control pills if they were available without a prescription. With easy access to contraception the key to preventing unintended pregnancy, over-the-counter products make sense.

In Maryland, there are 1,273,970 women of childbearing age (13-44). Planned Parenthood of Maryland serves this population through seven health centers across the state, with the goal of reducing unintended pregnancy. According to a 1995 assessment of *Contraceptive Needs and Services in Maryland* by the Alan Guttmacher Institute, of the 664,580 women who needed contraceptive services and supplies, more than one third of them who are at or below 200% of poverty (257,430 women) relied on publicly supported services. It is this group of women who will benefit the most from the reintroduction of a vaginal sponge product: a safe, affordable, birth control method, which should be permitted over the counter. Many of the women in this demographic will not use contraception if they do not have access to a viable over-the-counter method because of the difficulty in accessing the public health system. In Maryland alone, it is estimated that only 46% of the women in need of subsidized services obtain care through either public or private providers. This leaves over 150,000 women at high risk of an unintended pregnancy.

Another valuable benefit of non-prescription products like the vaginal sponge is its affordability. Many low-income women can not afford to pay for prescription contraceptives such as the pill or a diaphragm, yet they can remain protected from unintended pregnancy by

purchasing the vaginal sponge, a more affordable alternative. For millions of uninsured Americans, over-the-counter medicine is the only means of health care available, and this includes contraception. In fact, even women who have health insurance are not guaranteed coverage for birth control.

The issue of privacy when it comes to purchasing contraception can not be overstated. While obtaining a prescription for birth control pills or getting fitted for a diaphragm involves visiting a health care provider and getting the necessary tests, many women need the privacy and anonymity of purchasing a product like the vaginal sponge, if it is made available over the counter. It is easier to use, and longer lasting in providing protection against pregnancy than other over the counter methods available such as spermicides and condoms.

Although the goal of Planned Parenthood and other reproductive health care providers is to increase access to *all* types of contraception, we understand that the unique properties of the vaginal sponge fills a void that has remained empty since it was taken off the market five years ago.

When it was discontinued in 1995, the vaginal sponge was one of the most popular contraceptive choices that did not require a doctor's visit, with one quarter of a billion sold over 12 years nationwide. In addition to its ease and affordability, women who do not engage in regular intercourse found the vaginal sponge to be an ideal method of contraception. A survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics shows that births from unintended pregnancies are increasing among never-married women. Many women who fall into this demographic do not need the consistency of the pill or the longevity of methods like Norplant, Depo-Provera or the IUD. Having an additional non-

prescriptive barrier method is an ideal opportunity to assist women to prevent unintended pregnancy.

According to research by James Trussell of Princeton University Office of Population Affairs, the vaginal sponge has been proven to be as effective as the diaphragm and the cervical cap for women who have had no previous births. The effectiveness of any method often is more determined by the human factor in appropriately and consistently using the method, than by the product itself. As always, the use of a contraceptive method is extremely more effective than no method at all.

The vaginal sponge has proven to be a valuable and popular method of over the counter contraception for many years. When it was taken off the market five years ago, it meant the removal of another opportunity for women to choose for themselves how best to prevent an unwanted pregnancy. If we are to diminish the epidemic of unintended pregnancy in the United States, we must provide women and men with more options, not less. At Planned Parenthood, we feel strongly that women should be able to benefit from its ease of use, accessibility, and affordability, and we ask you to reinstate the vaginal sponge as an over the counter method.