POLICY & PRACTICE

Controversial Abstinence Site

A new government Web site aimed at helping parents talk to their teens about sex and abstinence is drawing fire from reproductive-rights advocates. The Web site, www.4parents.gov, features interactive tools, statistics, and conversation starters to enable parents to discuss sex and relationships, sexually transmitted diseases, peer pressure, and abstinence. "These issues are some of the most important choices teens face physically and emotionally," HHS Secretary Mike Leavitt said in a statement. "Parents have a tremendous amount of influence on their children, and we want them to talk with their teens about abstinence so that they can stay safe and healthy." But the site has been criticized for providing inaccurate information about the effectiveness of condoms and making claims that "abortion complications" are a major cause of infertility. Critics, including the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, said the site also uses some loaded terms, including "unborn child" in reference to a fetus or embryo. "This Web site presents wrong and biased information as fact," Planned Parenthood interim President Karen Pearl said in a statement.

EC Legislation Fails

Colorado Governor Bill Owens (R) vetoed legislation last month that would have required all hospitals in his state to provide rape victims with information about the availability of emergency contraception. Gov. Owens said he objected to the legislation because it would not have provided victims with the "full, balanced and detailed array of information" needed to make a decision about emergency contraception. In addition, he said the bill did not include provisions to protect the right of hospitals with religious affiliation or moral objections to emergency contraception to opt out of the requirement. While the bill offered health care professionals the right to decline to offer emergency contraception, it did not provide that option to institutions, Gov. Owens said. "This bill would violate fundamental constitutional principles by forcing an institution to say things to patients that it explicitly does not believe to be morally or ethically valid," Gov. Owens said in his veto message.

Contraceptive Access

Elsewhere in the states, Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich (D) filed an emergency rule last month clarifying that state pharmacies that sell contraceptives must accept and fill such prescriptions without delay. The action comes after complaints filed against a licensed Illinois pharmacy that refused to dispense prescription contraceptives. "Our regulation says that if a woman goes to a pharmacy with a prescription for birth control, the pharmacy is not allowed to discriminate who they sell it to and who they don't. The pharmacy will be expected to accept that prescription and fill it in the same way, and in the same period of time they would fill any other prescription," Gov. Blagojevich said. "No delays. No hassles. No lecture. Just fill the prescription."

STDs Among Lesbians

Lesbians and bisexual women who participated in a focus group reported that the need to protect against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) is primarily a concern for heterosexual women, according to a study published in the March issue of Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health (Perspect. Sex. Reprod. Health 2005;37:6-12). The focus group included 23 lesbian and bisexual women between the ages of 18 and 29. Focus group participants also had limited knowledge of bacterial vaginosis and the potential for commons STDs, such as genital herpes, to be transmitted between women. These findings point to the need to design interventions that explain the risk of STD transmission between women, the study authors said. The authors also advises that interventions are most likely to be successful when they are framed in terms of sexual enjoyment and healthy sexuality instead of disease.

Prenatal Testing Legislation

New federal legislation aims to improve the information that expectant parents receive when a prenatal test is positive for conditions such as Down syndrome and spina bifida. The Prenatally Diagnosed Condition Awareness Act (S. 609/H.R. 1353) is sponsored by Sen. Sam Brownback (R-Kan.) and Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.). "We have been able to screen for certain conditions in the womb for quite some time now, but I'm concerned that we don't have a great track record for handling that information very well," Sen. Brownback said. The legislation is aimed at improving epidemiologic understanding of prenatally diagnosed conditions, ensuring confidentiality, and supporting health care providers who perform prenatal tests and deliver results. The bill would also authorize a study of the effectiveness of existing health care and family support services for children with disabilities and their families.

—Mary Ellen Schneider