

# Forum

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## PAYING FOR CONTRACEPTION

**W**ASHINGTON — Viagra is the drug of the year, the magic blue pill that has helped thousands of men overcome impotence.

Credit Viagra with one other benefit. It has helped powerfully to bring Congress to the point of rectifying one of the great stupidities in the health care system, the refusal of many insurance plans to cover contraceptives for women.



DAVID S. BRODER

Thirteen months ago, I wrote a column about the fact that two senators on opposite sides of the abortion debate — Harry Reid, D-Nev., and Olympia Snowe, R-Maine — had found common ground on a bill to require insurance companies that cover other prescriptions to pay for the pill and other contraceptive devices.

Reid, who is anti-abortion, and Snowe, who supports abortion rights, cited scientific studies that clearly demonstrate unwanted pregnancies among women who do not use contraceptives lead directly to abortions half the time. As Snowe testified, "The Alan Guttmacher Institute (a research center) concludes that the use of birth control lowers the likelihood of abortion by a remarkable 85 percent."

Yet a survey of group health plans by the same organization found that half do not cover any method of contraception and only 15 percent cover all five of the most widely used devices. The added irony, as Reid pointed

ed out, is that many of those plans do pay for abortion or sterilization and virtually all cover the cost of delivering a child — all of them far more expensive than the \$20 to \$30 monthly cost of birth control pills.

Publicity about the Snowe-Reid bill drew thousands of letters of support — but no action on Capitol Hill.

And then came Viagra and all the TV and newspaper stories about the readiness or reluctance of various health insurance plans to meet the \$10-a-pill cost of the anti-impotence drug. It wasn't long before folks were pointing to what Reid calls "the double standard" of demanding coverage for a male potency pill but leaving women without contraceptive insurance.

Last year, Reid and Snowe rounded up 10 co-sponsors for their bill and couldn't get a hearing on it. This year, they have more than 30 co-sponsors and last Tuesday heard the legislation praised by witness after witness at a committee hearing that was more a love-in than an inquiry.

It looks very much as if Congress may be shamed into doing something right.

"I have no problem with covering Viagra," Reid said in his Tuesday testimony. "But if we are going to cover Viagra, shouldn't we first remedy the inequities which exist with prescription contraceptives? This Viagra double standard is just another symptom of how biased our health care system has been against women. If men were the ones who needed prescription contraceptives, I have no doubt they would have been covered years ago."

Snowe offered some history that backs up Reid's point, noting that until Congress mandated it in 1978, more than two out of five insurance policies did not cover maternity bene-

fits. "So here we are, 20 years later, battling some of the same insurance companies that in 1978 didn't want to provide the same coverage we now take for granted," she said. "And yet, along comes that little blue pill we've all been hearing so much about — Viagra — and many insurance companies have already stepped forward to cover it."

There is no answer to that contention. The Health Insurance Association of America, invited to testify Tuesday, declined, and its president, Bill Gradison, told me, "We oppose government mandates, but we're not going to spend a dime fighting this."

In an even clearer sign of change, the House on July 16 for the first time voted to require health insurance companies covering federal employees to include contraceptives along with other prescriptions. Rep. Nita Lowey, D-N.Y., who sponsored the amendment, pointed out to me that at least three dozen Republicans and Democrats who are considered anti-abortion helped achieve the 224-198 victory, signaling that this could indeed be common ground. Right-to-life advocates limited themselves to seeking — and getting — assurances that abortion pills like RU-486 would not be covered.

Reid and Snowe will offer the same provision, for government employees, when the Treasury-Postal Service appropriations bill reaches the Senate floor, with good prospects of success. Then they will try to attach the broader requirement for all insurance plans to the bill financing the Department of Health and Human Services.

Thanks to Viagra, common sense is starting to prevail.

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