Protecting Women’s Rights to Basic Reproductive Health Care

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Women’s rights are under attack. As family physicians, we know that insurance coverage for contraception is essential for all of our patients. Yet, last June, five Supreme Court justices disregarded science and public health when they sided with corporations like Hobby Lobby to deny important emergency and long-acting contraceptives such as Plan B, Ella, Mirena, and Paragard.

In *Burwell vs. Hobby Lobby*, the Supreme Court held that the ACA’s requirement that employer health insurance include coverage for contraception violates the employer’s religious freedom. This ruling sets a disturbing new precedent that allows corporations to determine employees’ access to health care services. In the same warped vein as a previous ruling to allow corporations to make political contributions, it also suggests corporations are sentient beings!

As family physicians, we all understand the importance of prevention and future pregnancy planning. As such, when the Department of Health and Human Services, guided by recommendations from the Institute of Medicine, decided what services to define as “essential,” they included the full spectrum of contraception. A large victory in the ACA was the acknowledgement that all Americans deserve access to basic preventive health care, including well-woman visits and all FDA-approved contraceptives, without paying out-of-pocket. Let’s not let this victory be swept away.

We care for medically underserved populations, and we see the impact of unintended pregnancies on each woman's wellbeing. Last week, we saw a 28-year-old woman who was in a new relationship and wanted to keep herself from getting pregnant. She wanted a Mirena IUD, but had recently lost her job, did not yet meet the income requirement for the state program FamPact, and could not afford the $700 for a Mirena.

Given her history of complicated migraines, she ended up leaving with a bag of condoms and a plea to find coverage.

Giving our patient the power to control her life trajectory starts with the power to control her own reproductive health. The Hobby Lobby decision allows primarily male CEOs to dictate to female employees limits on their reproductive health. Women pay for their insurance with their hard work, and there is nothing “free” about the inclusion of coverage for contraception, as some might claim. In these still difficult economic times, patients should not be placed in the position of choosing between contraception and their monthly household bills.

We are deeply disappointed that the Court has placed the personal beliefs of the few ahead of the preventive needs of the many. Electing representatives in Congress this year who value women’s health care rights is our only hope to remedy this injustice. It was Congress’ Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 that gave the five Supreme Court justices legal traction in the Hobby Lobby ruling. We urge our Academy to join with ACOG, AAP, ANA and PRH to object to this religious exemption given to corporations by supporting legislation like the Protect Women’s Health from Corporate Interference Act which was recently blocked by Senate Republicans. Senator Ted Cruz was quoted as saying “Nobody, nobody, nobody is talking about restricting access to contraceptives.”

Perhaps he should come visit our clinic, or yours.