

A reprint of article in MN Daily:
<http://www.mndaily.com/articles/2005/07/27/64850>

For the complete version of the story with photos, please visit www.MNDaily.com.

July 27, 2005

Opinion [CONTRACEPTION]

Protecting women's reproductive rights on college campuses

By Kristina Shaw, Vice President
National Organization for Women, Minnesota Chapter.

College campuses have emerged as the latest battlefield in the nation's war on women's reproductive rights. Wisconsin has passed a bill entitled UW Birth Control Ban-AB 343. This bill prohibits University of Wisconsin campuses from prescribing, dispensing and advertising all forms of birth control and emergency contraceptives. Wisconsin State Rep. Dan LeMahieu, R-Oostburg, introduced this bill based on the belief that "dispensing birth control and emergency contraceptives leads to promiscuity." In reality, full access to all birth control options — including emergency contraceptives — has no effect on the level of women's promiscuity. Instead, birth control and emergency contraceptives help prevent more than 35,000 unintended births and 800,000 abortions each year.

The bill denies thousands of women essential health-care services and reproductive choices and affects their lives and futures in many ways. With this bill, rape victims will no longer be able to turn to campus health services to obtain emergency contraceptives to prevent an unwanted pregnancy, or receive postrape counseling and education — adding even more stress to a traumatic event. Students who want birth-control prescriptions, emergency contraceptives or even information about preventive birth control are forced to seek out these services at off-campus clinics. This poses a problem not only for students who attend rural Wisconsin university campuses and might not have a clinic nearby but also for many students who attend urban campuses but do not have access to transportation, money, insurance or time to travel to an off-campus clinic. By removing the convenience of having these services on campus, students are less likely to seek out preventive birth control, which could lead to more unintended pregnancies and abortions. Emergency contraceptives are especially vulnerable to this bill because they must be taken within 72 hours to effectively prevent pregnancy, thus, adding even more pressure for students to find a way off-campus to receive the prescription.

Any rollback of women's reproductive rights is inexcusable, but the bill is especially disturbing because it is directed at college campuses and targets a population in which there tends to be a high concurrency of sexual assaults and unplanned sexual encounters. During a time in their lives when they need full access to all birth control options the most, this bill denies women access to any options at all. College is also a time when students are transforming into young adults and are taking control of their lives and futures. Denying women full reproductive services and choices sends the message that women cannot be trusted to make decisions that affect their bodies, their lives and their futures.

In passing this bill, Wisconsin has the distinct honor of becoming the first state in the nation to limit college students' access to full birth control options. Minnesotans should

be concerned about what this bill means for their future. Not only does the bill affect the 13,000 Minnesotans who attend college in Wisconsin, but it also sets a dangerous precedent for similar bills to be introduced on college campuses across the nation in the future. Currently, University of Minnesota students have access to full reproductive services at their on-campus clinics, including emergency contraceptives, pregnancy counseling, access to birth-control prescriptions and more. However, Minnesota, as Wisconsin's nearest neighbor, might be the next stop in the introduction of college campus birth-control-ban bills.

Women's organizations are fighting back. The National Organization for Women, Planned Parenthood, NARAL and others have announced their opposition to college campus birth-control bans. In addition, the Minnesota chapter of the National Organization for Women has launched its Birth-Control NOW! campaign, focusing on stopping the gradual rollback of women's reproductive rights. A recent victory for the organization was when Walgreens amended its Pharmacist Refusal Clause. This clause stated that if a pharmacist refuses to fill a prescription, usually birth control or emergency contraceptives, on the basis of his or her "moral beliefs," the customer was sent to another store to get her prescription filled. The amended policy places this burden back on Walgreens, making the company deliver the prescription from another store to the store the customer is at, or the customer's house, in a timely manner. This insures that women are able to receive their prescription without undue burden or distress. Actions such as NOW's campaign and others provide some light in the dark, uphill battle for the preservation of women's reproductive rights.

Above all, Minnesotans should train a watchful eye on the development of Wisconsin's bill because, one semester, a similar bill might end up at the University of Minnesota's doorstep — stripping students of the essential reproductive-rights services they now take for granted.