

Standing up for scientific principles

by *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

Ideology, not science, influenced a 2006 ruling by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration that limited access to the so-called morning after pill, a federal judge ruled last week.

In that finding, Judge Edward R. Korman arrived a bit late to the party. Most observers had reached the same conclusion several years ago, albeit without the benefit of extensive evidence upon which the ruling was based.

As a result of Judge Korman's decision, women as young as age 17 now will have access to the contraceptive, sold under the name Plan B for Women, without a prescription. The FDA also will reconsider making Plan B available to women of any age.

The availability of Plan B doesn't mean that teenagers can or should have unprotected sex. There are plenty of excellent reasons to postpone that until after marriage.

But making Plan B available to young women without a prescription will prevent unintended pregnancies and reduce abortions — two worthy goals that should be supported by everyone.

Unfortunately, they haven't been. Some religious conservatives have argued that the availability of effective contraceptives makes it more likely that young people will have sex.

The facts don't bear that out. In Europe, where the drug has been available for years, teen pregnancy rates are lower than in the United States.

The Bush administration, in the thrall of religious conservatives, repeatedly stalled efforts to make the drug available without a prescription.

Plan B is two high-dose contraceptives. Taken within 72 hours of unprotected sex, it can prevent pregnancy. It has no serious long-term side effects. Making it available without a prescription would give more women access to birth control if their primary means of contraception failed — or if they were the victim of rape.

The FDA's scientific advisory board, as well as the World Health Organization and a slew of medical and

public health groups, had urged that Plan B should be sold without a prescription.

Finally, under pressure from Senate Democrats who refused to hold confirmation hearings on an FDA commissioner, the Bush administration agreed to allow nonprescription sales of the drug to women 18 or older.

Plan B is hardly the only example of muzzled or misdirected science under the Bush administration. It removed information on contraceptives from government websites, edited scientific reports to misrepresent the evidence on global warming and threatened the jobs of scientists who spoke out.

President Barack Obama promised to bring a new respect for the scientific process in government regulation. This month, he ordered his top scientific advisors to develop recommendations designed to guarantee integrity and prevent the distortion or concealment of scientific data.

Recommendations and regulations are a worthwhile first step. But they can be rewritten when a new administration takes office.

Congress should consider codifying those recommendations into laws that would be far more difficult to discard.

The best public policy is based upon empirical knowledge. That's a core principle of the Age of Enlightenment, which gave birth to the scientific method and "not coincidentally" to American democracy.

Those values are far too important to be disregarded for the sake of political expediency of any stripe.

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