



A setback for health care

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What years of anti-abortion protests and court challenges could not accomplish, the House of Representatives -- notably Democrats who hold the majority -- is ready to do with the stroke of a pen: Deny women the right to choose.

Oh, women will, technically speaking, still have the right to get an abortion. What many won't have, though, is the means to afford one. Not if a reactionary, discriminatory and wholly unacceptable amendment is allowed to stand.

The amendment, pushed by Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich., a leading abortion foe, doesn't just ban a new government-run public option from covering so-called elective abortions. It prohibits any health plan participating in a new insurance exchange from offering abortion coverage. The exchange, remember, is the very place where people would go to get the best insurance rates possible.

To be sure, the bill does allow coverage of abortion in cases of rape, incest or where the mother's life is at stake. But not, conspicuously, her health.

And women could purchase a rider -- if, that is, an insurer offers it. And if they could afford it. And if they have the foresight to plan for an unplanned pregnancy.

In reality, women would have to choose between affordable health coverage that doesn't cover all their potential needs, or paying extra.

Why should women have to pay any premium for a legal procedure that millions may someday need? Why should they have the added burden of deciding whether to play the odds on any aspect of their health?

This amendment was largely the result of intense lobbying by the Catholic Church. We can understand that abortion is too core an issue for the church to bend on, even if it means blocking the very health care reform it otherwise advocates.

Would that members of Congress were so committed to the fundamental principles they swore to uphold. Would that they refused to bend on equal protection under the law. The separation of church and state. The rights of life, liberty and privacy. Core beliefs of America since its founding. They cannot be bargained away for political convenience.

Congress and President Obama must not allow religion to dictate public policy. They must not carve out exceptions that restrict the health care of 51 percent of Americans in a bill whose goal is near-universal coverage. And they must not effectively revoke a woman's right to safe, legal and affordable abortion and call it reform.

The issue:

The House health care bill puts severe restrictions on abortion coverage.

The stakes:

Women's rights should not be the price of health care reform.

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