



Misconception

Republicans must stop fighting against birth control and battle government control instead

By MICHAEL D. TANNER\
February 18, 2012

With his mandate that all employers, including religiously affiliated institutions such as Catholic hospitals and charities, provide workers with health insurance that covers contraceptives, President Obama handed Republicans a terrific opportunity to talk about the growing intrusiveness of government.

This is, after all, an administration that wants to dictate what foods we eat, what lightbulbs we use, what cars we drive, even how our toilets flush.

Yet Republicans are in the process of fumbling this opportunity away by turning what should be a discussion of government power into an argument about contraception.

For a long time, it was said that Democrats are terrified that somewhere someone is making money, and Republicans are terrified that someone somewhere is having fun. And with this issue — as so often seems the case when the subject turns to sex — Republicans seem determined to prove this stereotype true.

The most obvious case was the suggestion by Foster Friess, the biggest funder of Republican presidential candidate Rick Santorum's super PAC, that the best contraception was for women to put an aspirin between their knees. Friess now suggests that he was joking. Yet Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity, among others, have joined in with this line of argument, suggesting that contraception was unnecessary if women just exercised "self-restraint." Running through the Republican outrage over this issue has been a subcurrent that contraceptives are, in Santorum's words, "a license to do things in the sexual realm that is counter to how things are supposed to be."

Setting aside the fact that even married women use contraceptives, why are Republicans using this issue to lecture us on morality?

The problem with the contraceptive mandate is not the contraceptive part — it's the *mandate*. The new health-care law requires every employer with 50 or more employees to provide their workers with health insurance. It also requires every American who doesn't receive health insurance through work or a government program to buy insurance themselves or face a fine.

But simply providing or buying insurance is not enough to fulfill the mandate. The insurance must satisfy the government's definition of what qualifies as proper insurance, including a long list of benefits that the government thinks you should have.

In this case, the benefit we are talking about is contraceptives, and it has sparked particular outrage because it will force religious institutions to pay, even indirectly, for a benefit that they find morally repugnant. But it is hardly the only benefit that the new health-care law mandates. Among other benefits, your policy must now include mental health benefits, drug and alcohol rehabilitation, prescription drugs, dental and vision care for children and a host of other services. You may not want those benefits, and they may make your insurance more expensive, but it is no longer your choice. The government will now decide for you. Your choice of deductibles and co-payments will also be restricted.

This debate has nothing to do with access to birth control. Contraceptives are legal. There is nothing that prevents any woman who wants contraceptives from purchasing them. Most insurance plans already do so, and when they don't, women can purchase a rider that provides the additional coverage.

This is a debate about forcing all employers to pay for a benefit, rather than having such decisions based on the choices of employers and employees. It doesn't matter whether we are talking about contraceptives, dental care or spa treatments.

This should provide Republicans with an opening to discuss the arrogance of a government that presumes to know better than we do how to run our lives. Yet too many Republicans seem to see this as an opportunity to tell us how they would run our lives instead. Both sides in this debate are contemptuous of our ability to make our own decisions.

Most Americans would prefer that the government simply leave us alone. They do not want the president to be our national employee benefits administrator, nor do they want him to be our preacher-in-chief.

Republicans need to learn the difference.

Michael D. Tanner is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and author of "Bad Medicine: A Guide to the Real Costs and Consequences of the New Health Care Law."