



2008 Emergency Contraception Access Project Report

Project Background

In December 2006, the Washington State Board of Pharmacy proposed two rules that protect access to valid prescription and behind-the-counter medications without hassle or delay. NARAL Pro-Choice Washington Foundation, along with coalition allies, organized thousands of petition signatures, letters, emails, phone calls, and public testimonies in support of these rules. The rules (WAC 246-869-010 and WAC 246-863-095) were unanimously approved by the Board in April 2007.

While the rules cover all prescription and behind-the-counter medications, Plan B® emergency contraception was the source of much of the controversy. Plan B® is a high-dose version of the regular birth control pill, and is most effective the sooner it is taken. If the woman is already pregnant, it has no effect. It is not the same as RU-486, also known as the abortion pill, which can only be administered under medical supervision.

On the day that the rules were to go into effect, two pharmacists and a pharmacy owner filed a lawsuit to block the rules. Currently, a federal judge has imposed an injunction, thereby allowing pharmacists to refuse to fill prescriptions and behind-the-counter medications for personal, non-medical reasons. A trial is set for fall 2008.

The ongoing challenge to the Pharmacy Board rules and concern over the availability of Plan B® led NARAL Pro-Choice Washington Foundation to launch the Emergency Contraception Access Project to better understand how accessible Plan B® is for women across the state.

Project Description

After compiling a comprehensive list of all the pharmacies in the state, NARAL Pro-Choice Washington Foundation launched the Emergency Contraception Access Project in October 2007. We recruited project volunteers from our list of email activists and from our network of members. We set up an online survey for our volunteers to use while they called pharmacies. Volunteers were assigned about 20 pharmacies to call. The volunteers attempted to speak with pharmacists at all the pharmacies in the state. They asked questions on whether the pharmacy stocked Plan B®, whether the pharmacy had pharmacists on staff who refuse to dispense Plan B®, and other questions on pricing, stocking and Medicaid.

All findings are based on the volunteer surveys and the responses they got from the pharmacists who participated.



Key Facts and Figures:

1,190: Number of pharmacies in Washington

1,014: Number of pharmacies surveyed by NARAL Pro-Choice Washington Foundation volunteers

7.4%: Percentage of surveyed pharmacies that do **NOT** stock Plan B® emergency contraception

3%: Percentage of surveyed pharmacies with pharmacists on staff who refuse to dispense Plan B® emergency contraception

4%: Percentage of pharmacies that refused to speak with our volunteers



WHO INVITED THE PHARMACIST?

Project Findings

1 in 10 Washington Pharmacies Do Not Stock or Refuse to Dispense

Project volunteers attempted to contact all of the 1,190 pharmacies in Washington State. They were able to complete surveys for 1,014 pharmacies, evenly distributed throughout the state. Based on volunteer interviews, 7.4% of Washington pharmacies do not stock Plan B® emergency contraception. Of the pharmacies that do stock Plan B®, 3% have at least one pharmacist on staff who refuses to dispense it. Taken together, that means that more than 10% of the surveyed pharmacies in Washington State could turn away a woman seeking Plan B® emergency contraception.

In some cases, that means the woman has been harassed or shamed by the pharmacist behind the counter. In all cases, it prolongs the amount of time it takes her to access Plan B® and increases her chances of unintended pregnancy.

Regional Consistencies

Pharmacies that do not stock Plan B® can be found statewide, from Bellevue to Spokane, including at least 13 in Seattle. Similarly, pharmacists who refuse to dispense Plan B® can be found throughout the state, including the city of Seattle.

Unfortunately, the consequences for women are not the same from place to place. In rural areas, the distance between pharmacies can be a serious burden. The availability, time and cost of transportation are all factors that can negatively impact a woman's ability to travel to multiple pharmacies in hopes of receiving a needed, time-sensitive medication.

Regardless of where she lives, a woman should be able to access the medications she needs without hassle, delay or judgment.

Cle Elum pharmacist: “religiously opposed to emergency contraception”

Pharmacist in Vancouver: “I don’t have time for playing games”



- ◆ The average cost of Plan B® at the surveyed pharmacies is \$45, with some charging as much as \$80.
- ◆ 12% of the surveyed pharmacists were unaware that Medicaid covers Plan B®, even without a prescription.
- ◆ Several pharmacists mistakenly believed they needed a special license to dispense it.

Implications for Washington State

- ◆ There is a need for access to and information about Plan B® emergency contraception that is currently unmet. In pharmacies statewide, there is either no Plan B® in stock, or there are pharmacists on staff who refuse to dispense. Either situation is an increased burden to access: **One in ten is one too many.**
- ◆ Pharmacists need better information on what Plan B® is, who can buy it, and how to apply for a Medicaid reimbursement. The next phase of NARAL Pro-Choice Washington's Emergency Contraception Access Project will involve an educational component.
- ◆ The knowledge and attitudes of pharmacists and pharmacy owners has a tangible impact on the lives of the women of Washington.



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