

House Votes to Ban Abortion Coverage

Measure Would Again Restrict Federal Workers' Insurance Program

7/24/95
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The House yesterday voted to reinstate a ban that prohibits the federal employees health insurance program from paying for abortions except when a woman's life is in danger.

The measure, part of a \$23 billion appropriations bill, would reimpose a ban that ran from 1984 until 1993, when President Clinton and congressional Democrats lifted the prohibi-

tion on the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program. Of the 345 health insurance plans offered through the program, 178 provide abortion coverage.

Senior administration officials said they would recommend that Clinton veto the bill because of the abortion ban and other spending cuts. The Senate may begin work on its version of the bill this week.

House lawmakers rebuffed an attempt by Democrats to strip out the abortion ban. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer

(D-Md.) offered an amendment to drop the provision barring abortion coverage, a move that stirred considerable debate and split the Democratic and Republican parties. Many moderate Republicans joined the Democrats on the 235 to 188 vote.

Opponents of the ban contended it amounted to discrimination against 1.2 million women of reproductive age covered by the federal health program. Rep. Nydia M. Velazquez (D-N.Y.) called the ban a "repulsive anti-women provision" written by "self-appointed morality police."

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But Rep. Christopher H. Smith (R-N.J.) and other Republicans stressed that the government pays 72 percent of the premiums in the federal health program. "The people do not want to subsidize abortion on demand, they do not want taxpayer funds or premium funds being used to subsidize [the] willful killing of unborn children," Smith said.

Their remarks were part of a divisive and emotional debate during consideration of the fiscal 1996 appropriations bill that funds the Treasury Department, the White House, small agencies and federal employee programs. The debate on the bill, which calls for the elimination of the president's Council of Economic Advisers, continued last night as Republicans attacked funding for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and other parts of the government.

House Democrats portrayed the restriction on federal employees as part of a wider assault underway by conservative Republicans to limit medical care for women and undermine the Supreme Court decision that provides a constitutional right to abortion. Democrats were particularly outraged that the bill would not provide insurance coverage for women who seek abortions because of rape or incest, even though the government provides funding for such abortions under the Medicaid program.

But the Medicaid rules also may be up for reconsideration this week. Rep. Ernest I. Istook Jr. (R-Okla.) said yes-

terday that he plans to offer an amendment to another appropriations bill that would allow states to choose whether to use Medicaid funds to pay for abortions in the case of rape or incest.

Yesterday's floor debate featured longtime foes of abortion, such as

Smith and Rep. Henry J. Hyde (R-Ill.) "It is violence," Smith said of abortion as he described "chemical poisonings" and "the dismemberment of unborn children" before a gallery packed with tourists. Government exists, Hyde said, "to protect the weak from the strong."

Smith said about 17,000 abortions

were paid for by the program before 1984. The Office of Personnel Management said data provided by the health insurance company participating in the program covers broad categories of medical services but does not address why the services are rendered, making it impossible to determine how many abortions were performed when the ban was not in effect.

The federal health program provides insurance coverage for about 4 million current and retired government workers and their families. The program covers members of Congress and their staffs.

Hoyer and Rep. Nancy L. Johnson (R-Conn.) said the health insurance benefits were part of the compensation package provided federal workers and argued that the Congress should not dictate how the employees choose to spend their insurance premiums. "It is wrong," Hoyer said, contending the bill "undermines their own free choice, not of an abortion, but of how they spend their money."

Rep. Marge Roukema (R-N.J.) argued that Republicans who were seeking to roll back intrusive federal regulations should not support legislation that puts the government "in charge of a profound moral decision. . . . We should not even be debating this."

Rep. Nita M. Lowey (D-N.Y.) contended that the GOP's House majority wants to "take American women backward. This is one of the first steps in the radical right's campaign to eliminate the right to choose."