

Obama calls morning-after pill call 'common sense'

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President Barack Obama speaks during a news conference in the White House briefing room in Washington, Thursday, Dec. 8, 2011. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

(AP) -- President Barack Obama on Thursday endorsed but said he did not steer his administration's decision to halt the over-the-counter sale of an anti-pregnancy drug to girls under 17, saying it was common sense to keep a morning-after pill away for children who may misuse it. Citing his own daughters, he said: "I think most parents would probably feel the same way."

Plenty of pediatric leaders and women's advocacy groups did not, as reaction to Wednesday's politically volatile decision piled in. Critics said politics had trumped science, again.

"When President Obama took office, he pledged the administration's commitment to scientific integrity," said Cynthia Pearson of the National Women's Health Network. "This decision is a betrayal of that promise."

At issue is the Plan B pill, which can prevent pregnancy if taken soon enough after unprotected sex.

It is available without a prescription only to those 17 and older who can prove their age - and that will now remain the case after Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius overruled scientists at the Food and Drug Administration, who were preparing to let the pill be sold without a prescription or age limit.

Obama rallied around Sebelius' arguments that younger girls may not be able to understand the medicine's labeling or use the pill properly. He insisted he was not involved in the decision in any way.

"I will say this, as the father of two young daughters: I think it is important for us to make sure that, you know, we apply some common sense to various rules when it comes to over-the-counter medicine," Obama said in a brief news conference at the White House.

Obama's daughter Malia is 13. His daughter Sasha is 10.

Obama said that as he understood it, Sebelius was wary of a 10-year-old or 11-year-old going into a drugstore and buying a medication - one on the shelves next to "the bubble gum and batteries" - that could be harmful if not used properly.

Stores, though, were never likely to put the drug near chewing gum or batteries. It was going to go on shelves by condoms, spermicides and pregnancy tests.

The rhetorical emphasis on the potential for 11- and 12-year-old girls to use the pill also rankled advocates.

There are no age restrictions on other over-the-counter drugs that could potentially have serious side-effects in young children.

According to the Guttmacher Institute, fewer than 1 percent of 11-year-old girls are sexually active, but almost half of girls have had sex by their 17th birthdays, most of those beginning at age 15 or 16.

Plan B costs about \$50 for the single-pill package, and "no 11-year-old or 12-year-old is going to have that kind of money anyway," said Dr. Cora Breuner of the American Academy of Pediatrics, a professor of pediatric and adolescent medicine at the University of Washington.

The pediatricians' group, along with the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American Medical Association, has pushed for over-the-counter access as a way to reduce unplanned pregnancies.

Taking Plan B within 72 hours of rape, condom failure or just forgetting regular contraception can cut the chances of pregnancy by up to 89 percent. It works best if taken within 24 hours.

Sebelius' decision pleased conservative critics.

"The FDA did not have the data to support a decision of this magnitude. The secretary pointed out obvious deficiencies in the research and acted in the interest of young girls," said Rep. Joe Pitts, R-Pa.

FDA Commissioner Dr. Margaret Hamburg made clear that the decision is highly unusual. She said her agency's drug-safety experts had carefully considered the question of young girls and she had agreed that Plan B's

age limit should be lifted.

A person familiar with the decision said Sebelius did not share her reservations about Plan B ahead of time with the FDA.

The HHS secretary made her decision Tuesday night ahead of an expected announcement by the FDA on Wednesday. Sebelius notified Hamburg on Wednesday morning, and then told the White House before publicly releasing her determination.

The person spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

The move has election-year implications and angered many Democrats. Sen. Patty Murray of Washington, a member of the Senate leadership, already was asking Sebelius to explain her decision. But it also could serve to illustrate to independents Obama is not the liberal ideologue Republicans claim.

Presidential spokesman Jay Carney said "there was communication" between the White House and the health agency during the decision-making process. But he emphasized that it was Sebelius' decision.

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