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Welsh girls to get morning-after pill for free

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(AP) -- Women and girls as young as 13 in Wales can get the morning-after pill free without a prescription from pharmacies, beginning Friday.

The legal age of consent for sex in Britain is 16, and some critics have slammed the policy as hypocritical and encouraging young girls to have sex.

The initiative is aimed at fighting teen pregnancy and was first announced last year by Welsh Health Minister Edwina Hart. She said new ways were needed for teenage girls to get access to emergency contraception. Wales has some of the highest teen pregnancy rates in Britain, which in turn has the highest rate of teen pregnancy in western Europe.

The morning-after pill contains hormones that stop women from becoming pregnant if taken within about three days of having unprotected sex. It is not suitable for women with certain health conditions like a history of blood clots or liver disease.

The morning-after pill is already free to women across the U.K. if prescribed by their doctor or a sexual health clinic, but Wales is the first region to offer the pill for free without a prescription in its more than 700 pharmacies, though there are similar small-scale policies in parts of England and Scotland. If bought over the counter, the pill typically costs about 25 pounds (US$40).

Welsh officials said their plan focuses on preventing teenage

pregnancies by offering sex education and condoms but that it is also necessary to introduce wider use of the morning-after pill.

"While (condoms) remain the best form of contraception, from 1 April, pharmacists in Wales will be able to provide the morning after pill to individuals and provide discreet counseling and advice on contraceptive use," said the Welsh Assembly government. "Pharmacists have a key role to play in the reduction of unwanted pregnancies, especially when coupled with advice."

Some critics called the initiative superficial and doubted it would have much impact on the teen pregnancy rate.

"This will be looked upon as a quick fix for girls," said Josephine Quintavalle, founder of the Christian group Comment on Reproductive Ethics. "It gives them carte blanche to do whatever they want without talking to their parents."

Elsewhere in Europe, the morning-after pill is available in Germany with a doctor's prescription and is free for women under 20. In France, teenagers under 18 can also get the pill for free at a pharmacy without a prescription or their parents' consent. In Scandinavia, the morning-after pill is available to teenagers over 16 in pharmacies but the age limit is not strictly enforced. The pill is free in youth clinics but must be paid for in pharmacies.

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