

‘Morning-after’ pill use affected little by easy access: Study also finds greater promiscuity was not apparent

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A new British study indicates that use of emergency contraception changed little after a law allowing over-the-counter distribution of the “morning-after” pill went into effect in the United Kingdom.

Massachusetts lawmakers are close to enacting a similar law.

The study, released Friday by BMJ, a British medical journal, indicated that after the United Kingdom switched from prescription-only to over-the-counter availability in 2001, women became no more likely to have unprotected sex. So contrary to what opponents of the pill say, the new access did not appear to encourage promiscuity.

The study also indicated the number of women who used emergency contraception stayed about the same. So contrary to what advocates of the pill say, the new ease of access did not seem to expand the pool of women who used them to block pregnancy.

The study, based on annual surveys of more than 7,000 women, is the first to examine the effect of over-the-counter emergency contraception by following a large population, its lead author said. It comes on the heels of the Massachusetts House’s veto-proof vote in favor of a bill that would require hospitals to supply emergency contraception to rape victims and allow specially trained pharmacists to dispense it without a prescription.

The measure, all but sure to become law because the Senate approved a similar bill, has provoked opposition from pro-life groups.

Cicely Marston, lead researcher of the British study, acknowledged the study could not track the most-touted benefit of over-the-counter access, “which is that there may be an advantage in terms of time: Women may be able to access the method more quickly, which would make it more effective.”

That is no small advantage, said Angus McQuilken of the Planned Parenthood League of Massachusetts, which supports the legislation. “Providing access without a prescription will allow rape victims and other women to get emergency contraception when it will be most effective, in the first 12 to 24 hours,” he said.

Opponents of the bill raised a different problem with the British study: It looked at women between ages 16 and 49, because in Britain, girls younger than 16 are not eligible to obtain emergency contraception without a prescription. The

Massachusetts bill carries no similar age restriction, said Kris Mineau, president of the Massachusetts Family Institute, which opposes it.