

Bill would give rape victims emergency pill

Second bill would establish standard of care for people who have been assaulted.

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Sexual assault victims would have access to emergency contraception and a minimum standard of medical care if the Texas Legislature passes two bills by Rep. Senfronia Thompson, D-Houston.

Thompson's first bill would require Texas hospitals — public and private — to provide information about emergency contraception to all patients who have been sexually assaulted. And if a patient requests the drug, known as the morning-after pill, the hospital would be required to provide a prescription.

The second bill, co-sponsored by Rep. Toby Goodman, R-Arlington, would establish a standard of care in all Texas emergency rooms. The bill asks for a private examination room for the patients to talk with law enforcement, hospital staff, family and friends.

All sexual assault patients would also receive information about sexually transmitted diseases, forensic and medical exams and referral to a rape crisis center.

"Rape is a very traumatic experience," Thompson said while announcing the legislation Monday. "Sexual violence survivors deserve to know they will receive appropriate medical intervention to prevent pregnancy."

Thompson authored similar legislation, which failed, in 2003.

While all sexual assault victims currently receive forensic and medical exams, the standard of care is not uniform, said Mary Levy, who has done more than 200 sexual assault examinations at St. David's Hospital.

According to a 2003 survey by the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault, 60 percent of emergency rooms do not provide emergency contraception to rape survivors.

"We have concerns with the bill because it would force hospitals, including religious hospitals, into providing a drug that can in some instances act as an abortive agent," said Joe Pojman, executive director of Texas Alliance for Life.

Dr. Diana Weihs, who practices obstetrics and gynecology, said people often confuse emergency contraception, which is a highly concentrated dose of hormones used to prevent conception, with mifepristone, also known as RU-486, which is used for medical abortions.

Emergency contraception, approved by the FDA, and marketed under the names Preven or Plan B, poses no risk to the mother or the fetus if the mother is pregnant, Weihs said. It works by delaying ovulation, fertilization and implantation before pregnancy occurs, she said.

According to the Texas Association of Planned Parenthood Affiliates, emergency contraception reduces the risk of pregnancy by 75 percent if taken within 72 hours.

Stacey Emick, legislative director of the Texas Right to Life Committee, said being offered emergency contraception is one more traumatic thing for an already traumatized person to think about.

"If they're just throwing a pill at her and saying, 'Here's how you get rid of the problem,' that's not an informed decision," she said. "You are putting her in a more vulnerable position."