

Refusal to ease access to 'Plan B' pill defies science

By JANE EISNER

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In the continuing controversy over what's known as the "morning-after" pill, I have tried to keep an open mind.

When hysterical e-mail complained that the Bush administration was sending women back to the Stone Age by not approving easier access to emergency contraception, I figured there had to be another side to the story.

There had to be some legitimate reason for stalling over a simple application to allow a drug known as "Plan B" to be sold over the counter, without a prescription.

It couldn't be that religious conservatives had hijacked the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. It couldn't be that the Bush administration was surreptitiously trying to limit the use of emergency contraception because some – not all – pro-lifers contend it's analogous to abortion.

Well, here's a lesson in what happens when you give these guys the benefit of the doubt. You end up writing columns like this one.

There seems to be no legitimate, public-health reason for our government repeatedly to ignore near-unanimous scientific advice by refusing to approve easier access to a safe, reliable and otherwise legal drug that helps women avoid unwanted pregnancy.

And if there's some sort of behind-the-scenes strategy going on to appease certain constituencies, the Bush administration ought to come clean.

An estimated 25,000 rape victims brutally become pregnant every year and should have the choice of ending their pregnancy before fertilization has likely occurred. And time is of the essence in emergency contraception.

Plan B has been shown to reduce the risk of pregnancy by 89 percent – if it is taken within 72 hours of unprotected intercourse. (It's even more effective when taken in the first 24 hours.) The pill is already available by prescription, but not every woman has quick access to a prescribing physician.

This is why a broad range of health professionals, including a lopsided majority of the FDA's own scientific advisory panel, believe it should be offered over the counter. Yet the most outspoken critic of the Plan B request, W. David Hager – a physician, an evangelical Christian and a member of the advisory board – has

boasted that a memo he wrote to the FDA played a role in rejection of the application.

The idea that one member's personal beliefs should trump broad scientific advice infuriates Dr. Hager's political critics. What infuriates me is how disingenuous he has been.

His initial concern was one I could share: He worried about making Plan B available to younger teenagers without parental or medical oversight. Maybe teens would use Plan B as birth control, which might lead to riskier sexual activity. I'm not sure I want my 15-year-old to be able to buy emergency contraception as if it were a pack of chewing gum.

But those concerns have been addressed. The manufacturer amended its application to make the pill available without a prescription only to those 16 and older, and only in places where there is a pharmacist on duty.

And Dr. Hager should know that questions raised about safety are bogus. Plan B is just a concentrated form of the birth control pill, which has a well-established safety record, and it's already available without a prescription in 34 countries. Further, yet another peer-reviewed study, this one released in January, found that access to Plan B did not lead women to engage in more risky sexual behavior.

Dr. Hager's objections may soon carry little weight. After *The Nation* magazine alleged last week that the Kentucky physician had sexually abused his former wife during their marriage and had an affair with a Bible-study classmate, Dr. Hager told a Lexington newspaper that the story was "not based on all of the facts." But he also said he expected not to be reappointed to the advisory panel when his term ends in June.

The FDA has no choice but to decide on Plan B and explain that decision to the women of this country. I'm trying to keep an open mind, but it's hard when the folks in charge seem to have closed theirs.

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