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Oppose change that puts reproductive rights at risk

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Current federal law protects health-care workers from having to participate in medical procedures they find morally or religiously objectionable. Doctors who don't want to perform abortions or prescribe birth-control pills don't have to.

The trouble is that such laws pose the potential to limit access to health care. But officials at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services don't seem worried about patients' rights. Instead, they want to ensure all health-care workers who refuse to participate in any procedure they object to - including abortion and sterilization - aren't discriminated against.

A new rule proposed by the department seeks to apply legal protections to all employees in a health-care facility - including those "whose task is to clean instruments."

It is written so broadly it could allow anyone working in health care - from pharmacists to anesthesiologists - to refuse to do their jobs. It could also protect these workers if they refuse to refer women to someone else for these services.

Hospitals and physicians and the thousands of health institutions subject to the rule should be concerned. They would have to certify in writing they're complying with federal law, and violations could lead to a loss of government funding.

But the rule also should outrage all Americans who support women's reproductive rights. It's an attempt to undermine access to health services for women, specifically abortions.

The Bush administration is no friend to women when it comes to preserving and protecting a woman's legal right to obtain an abortion. It has delayed approval of the so-called morning-after pill for young women, which would help them avoid pregnancy. It has objected to some stem-cell research because it considers microscopic embryos to be life in need of protection.

When we questioned a department spokesman about the rule, he suggested we consult with two Christian groups for an "objective" opinion.

Some of the laws protecting health-care workers with moral objections to medical procedures have been on the books since the 1970s. One can't help but ask: Why are these rules coming out now?

Perhaps the administration is simply catering to anti-abortion groups during an election season. Maybe the rule is the brainchild of individuals running the show at the federal agency.

According to Admiral Joxel Garcia, M.D., assistant secretary of health, "Many health-care providers routinely face pressure to change their medical practice - often in direct opposition to their personal convictions. ... Health-care providers shouldn't have to check their conscience at the hospital door."

It's hard to believe there are many doctors in this country who object to abortions and then perform them. And if they do have objections, they should make their views widely known so women seeking the procedure don't visit them.

Americans have about a month to comment on the proposed rule. They should voice opposition to it.

And in November, when they go to vote for this country's next president, they should remember that it matters who resides in the White House. An anti-choice administration has a lot of power to undermine a woman's ability to make decisions that affect her health and future.