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John Young: Shell game on women's health

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Please, someone. Pull the plug on this administration.

Justify it by the energy savings alone, megawatt hours that could be better used, now squandered in lame-duck lamentations.

Moreso, justify it in averting what lamebrain rule changes are likely in this administration's waning days.

Consider a directive that in one lunging swing would redefine abortion to include basic birth control, and at the same time acutely undermine health services for poor women.

The Department of Health and Human Services is considering draft language that would do two destructive things: (1) qualify organizations that oppose contraception to accept Title X family planning money; (2) fundamentally alter the definition of abortion to include many forms of contraception.

Abomination No. 1 is funneling to so-called crisis pregnancy centers money that's supposed to help poor women avert pregnancy and otherwise deal with health-care issues.

Often operated by abortion foes, crisis pregnancy centers help women deal with an unwanted pregnancy through adoption.

Meritorious though that is, it is light years removed from the work of Title X-funded women's health clinics. They provide contraception, do cancer screenings, test for HIV. They also, yes, counsel women with fertility problems about how to get pregnant.

The fact that some of these clinics perform or refer for abortion makes them targets for destructive shell games with funding.

Lone Star insanity

The Texas Legislature in 2005 directed \$5 million in family planning funds to crisis pregnancy centers. It also took \$20 million over two years away from traditional family planning providers and sent it to federally qualified health centers. That's a health-care segment that handles a broad range of health needs but don't specifically fill the niche traditional women's clinics do.

The clear intent of both of these initiatives was to undercut funding for women's clinics like Planned Parenthood, with their traditional role of using public funds to provide family planning and health care to the poor.

This has served as a double wallop for some agencies that do the heavy lifting for helping poor women stay healthy and control their reproductive destinies shy of abortion.

Planned Parenthood in Austin has had to stop offering free services to some of its poorest clients, limiting its no-cost services to those under 20. Though those 20 and older get reduced-price services, some can't afford even them.

Yes, let's make a tough job tougher — the job of preventing pregnancies that end up in abortion. More

abortions. Great policy.

Speaking of the latter, an ideologue's thrust is attempting to redefine abortion to include basic contraception, thereby matching the claims of people who oppose both. The HHS directive would prevent the recipients of federal dollars from discriminating against employees who oppose contraception and consider certain forms of it abortion.

Family planning organizations say this rule would be tantamount to redefining abortion and therefore conception. The accepted definition of the latter is the implantation of the fertilized egg. Some anti-abortion groups call the birth control pill and the morning-after pill abortifacients, though they prevent implantation of the egg.

Redefining abortion to include basic birth control could preclude federal funding for affected forms of contraception, as funding of abortion is prohibited.

That's the amazing thing about these many attempts to undermine family planning. Our tax dollars don't pay for abortion. What our tax dollars do with these agencies is prevent abortion in the most effective, real-world way we know — birth control — understanding that some people are going to have sex whether the purity police want it or not.

So, who's for pulling the plug? And for flipping the switch for sane policies supportive of family planning?

John Young's column appears Thursday and Sunday. E-mail: jyoung@wacotrib.com.