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Abortion-contraception arguments are really about teen sex

By Sarah Brown

Monday was the annual anti-abortion march in Washington to protest the Roe v. Wade ruling that legalized abortion in the United States. This march is part of the mid-winter scene here. And although there are a number of odd groups and characters who show up regularly for these types of events, there are also those in the crowd who sincerely object to induced abortion. Sometimes the view is based on an article of faith, sometimes because of a deeply upsetting personal experience, and sometimes because it just seems like the right cause to rally around. Mind you, there are a lot of things to protest these days – private sector greed, poor schools and Congressional paralysis, to say nothing of Afghani soldiers killing coalition forces.

Abortion shows no promise of becoming anything other than the sharp, first assault weapon in the culture wars. But there is now a nefarious and deeply disturbing movement to define contraception as sort of the same as abortion, even though the one intervention that we know without doubt can reduce abortion is birth control. Part of this assault is the pointed suggestion that several specific forms of birth control—especially the IUD and emergency contraception—are exactly the same as abortion and therefore equivalent to murder. This is madness. It is a point of view that has virtually no support among most American women or, in particular, reproductive biologists, who are the ones whose opinion should be dispositive here. And even if a person objects to a particular method, there are almost 20 others from which to choose. Moreover, about 98 percent of sexually experienced women in America, including Catholics and Mormons, have used birth control. I once ran the family planning clinics in Salt Lake City. I know these things.

Having followed this issue for years, I have become convinced that the arguments over abortion — and, increas-

ingly, the fussing about contraception — are not really about either topic, but are, rather, about what Rick Santorum cozied up to in saying that he objects to birth control because it “allows” certain types of behavior that he finds problematic, which I assume is mainly non-marital sex, especially teen sex.

Here is the relevant thought experiment: If all abortions were to married women (only 15 percent are), and if contraception were used only by married women (not sure how to measure this but married women use a boatload of it – witness their low birthrate), would there be annual Winter marches to protest abortion, with a glancing blow to contraception as well? Would insurance coverage of contraception with no co-pays or deductibles be threatened by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops plan to sue the government over the HHS decision to adopt a narrow definition of the religious exemption in requiring that contraception be included in health insurance plans?

If “we” -- and by “we” I mean especially politicians, religious leaders, and those who are willing to march in the cold each Winter -- are so upset about “bad” sexual behavior (which again, I think is what the abortion/contraception argument is really about), how about taking on some issues that are not all muddied up and are not the leading lights of the culture wars, such as violence against women or clergy abuse of children? How about the pornography industry or child prostitution? And if that is not enough to keep all the marchers busy, we can always include a few non-sexual topics like the murder of American troops by Afghani soldiers.

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