

FDA panel backs 'morning-after pill' Plan B over the counter: Plan B over the counter

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Cheers and criticism have followed a Food and Drug Administration panel recommendation that the so-called morning-after pill be made available over the counter. The panel voted 23-4 that the drug, also known as Plan B, should be made available without a prescription.

Barr Laboratories, a New Jersey-based pharmaceutical company seeking the new status for the drug, said Plan B can prevent 95 percent of expected pregnancies when it is taken within 24 hours of unprotected intercourse.

FDA officials are expected to make a final decision "in a matter of months," said spokesman Jason Brodsky.

Conservative Christian groups reacted with disappointment to the December 16 vote and were especially concerned about the potential influence on teenage sexuality and what they believe are the drug's abortive effects. "Parents deserve to know that if this proposal is approved, their teenage daughters will have free access to a powerful, abortion-inducing drug without their knowledge," said Cathy Cleaver Ruse, speaking for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Pro-Life Office. "This is bad policy and bad medicine."

Carrie Gordon Earll, Focus on the Family's senior policy analyst for bioethics, agreed. "Many women taking this drug may believe that they are preventing pregnancy when in fact the drug can cause an abortion once fertilization has occurred," she said. "The FDA recommendation to allow Plan B to be sold without medical oversight is irresponsible and dangerous."

But other groups were more supportive. Planned Parenthood Federation of America President Gloria Feldt called the recommendation "a victory for all women and for

sound public health policy. . . . Wider access to emergency contraception will prevent hundreds of thousands of unintended pregnancies and abortions every year.”

Tony Hileman, executive director of the American Humanist Association, called the panel’s vote a “responsible” decision without bowing to pressure. “Instead the FDA panel followed the facts and made their recommendation based on the scientific merits of Plan B, including the pill’s safety, efficacy and value to women’s health.” – *RNS*

Jeb Bush plans to build a faith-based prison

Florida Governor Jeb Bush has announced the creation of what he calls the nation’s first entirely faith-based prison at a facility in his state. Bush made the announcement in Tampa at a conference sponsored by his brother’s White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives.

The governor’s plan is for more than 790 inmates to live in eight dormitories at the Lawtey Correctional Institution in Raiford. Participation by inmates is voluntary, and entry into the program will not depend on the inmate’s faith preference or lack of faith. The volunteers involved in faith-based programs will focus on such issues as family life, personal growth and life skills.

“For those individuals who are motivated to change their lives, programs like this can make a tremendous difference and create a pathway out of the criminal justice system,” Bush said.

He applauded the work done by the office instituted by President Bush as well as the efforts by Attorney General John Ashcroft to recognize faith-based organizations. “It is imperative for government to work in close and careful coordination with community and faith-based organizations because government alone will never solve the problems tearing the fabric of our society,” he said.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, criticized the governor’s plan. “This is a clearly unconstitutional scheme,” he said in a statement. “A state can no more create a faith-based prison than it could set up faith-based public schools or faith-based police departments.” –*Religion News Service*