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Faith Fight in the Pharmacy

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GREAT FALLS, Mont. — Father Jay Peterson has a new pharmacy.

“For what it’s worth,” Father Peterson said, “I personally transferred all of my prescriptions to Snyder Drug.”

That might not be news, but what’s taking place at Snyder Drug of Great Falls, Mont., is. The owners there — Stuart and Kyla Anderson and Kurt and Kori Depner — in May began taking steps to make their pharmacy oral contraceptive-free. Selling such birth control, Stuart Anderson indicated in a June 3 Great Falls Tribune story, profits neither their store nor their souls, and, as Catholics they cannot in good conscience sell a drug that not only prevents conception but works as an abortifacient.

And so they have a new customer in Father Peterson, who hopes that others will support the store to make up for any business lost.

“We are open to spreading the word and to helping them flourish,” said Father Peterson, who is serving as administrator of the Diocese of Great Falls-Billings until Pope Benedict XVI appoints a new bishop.

Others in this town of 57,000 people, however, want to spread the word that what the Andersons and Depners are doing is wrong and that they should be stopped — sentiments that seem to be spreading nationally. Such calls often originate with Planned Parenthood, which in Montana has framed the no-sell decision as an “outrageous move” and a denial of basic health care.

“A pharmacy should not deny access to safe and effective drugs — particularly if the reason given spreads false information and jeopardizes the health and well-being of Great Falls women,” said Jill Baker, director of education for Planned Parenthood of Montana. She declined an interview request, instead referring the Register to a press release. “This sort of discrimination directly impacts the women of our community by restricting their right to access health care and imposing unnecessary barriers to fill legal prescriptions,” it said.

The group on its website urges visitors to sign a “Fill My Pills” petition, “demanding that pharmacies dispense medication, not moral judgment.”

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The Snyder owners, who bought the store in late 2006, did not expect the "firestorm" of attention their decision elicited. An Associated Press piece followed the Tribune cover story. It has also become popular Internet fodder for Planned Parenthood and numerous bloggers. "We're flabbergasted at the attention we've gotten, including some comments by people who aren't our customers that are downright malicious," Kurt Depner told the Associated Press.

Contacted at Snyder Drug, Stuart Anderson was hesitant for any more publicity and declined several interview requests.

Individual pharmacists declining to sell contraceptives are nothing new, noted Karen Brauer, president of Pharmacists for Life International. And although rarer, entire pharmacies also have made that decision. She recalls such pharmacies in Ohio and Indiana. The Andersons have two contraception-free stores, also owning Anderson Family Pharmacy in Great Falls.

Widespread Support

They are bucking a society in which contraception has become quite the norm. According to Planned Parenthood figures, 98% of U.S. women use a contraceptive method at some point in life. The group says that 90,560 Montana women are in need of contraceptive supplies.

It's generally believed that the percentage of Catholic women who use contraception doesn't vary much from the general population, despite Church teaching that contraception is intrinsically evil (Catechism, No. 2370).

Father Peterson referred to estimates that just 4% of child-bearing Catholic couples use Natural Family Planning.

The priest, who estimated that 15% of Great Falls is Catholic, conceded that most Catholics probably have "a certain knowledge" that the Church prohibits contraception. That is opposed, though, by the "American way of living."

"I've been really trying to promote the teachings of the Church, and we've had some reasons to think we're succeeding in some ways because there's a small but growing number of people in our diocese that are more and more aware of the Church teaching, more and more aware of Natural Family Planning and are willing to consider it," Father Peterson said.

The teaching against contraception also is taking a more notable role in marriage preparation, he added, as the diocese adapts materials from theology of the body apostle Christopher West.

Contraception proponents, most notably Planned Parenthood, put the media to even greater use.

"They use the mainstream media for free advertising of their product," said Brauer. "They bring sting operations to these pharmacies. They have a woman come up with a Planned Parenthood prescription for birth control. She'll cry and stomp her feet and threaten them with closure. They've had a ton of television time and radio time over this issue, and it has been advertising the morning-after-pill to people who didn't even know it existed."


In Montana, the Tribune quoted a potential Snyder Drug customer who called the pharmacy to check on its birth control prices. Told of their contraception phase-out, the woman said she "felt discriminated against and judged."

It's a common refrain heard from contraception advocates. And it's hogwash, said Ruben Obregon, president of a movement called No Room for Contraception (noroomforcontraception.org).

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"That's one of those typical comments when you don't have anything else to say," Obregon said. "It's ironic that those who are pro-choice really don't want to give [the freedom of choice] to pharmacists."

The pro-contraception argument that most irritates Obregon and Brauer, though, is that a denial of contraception is a denial of basic health care.

"Fertility is a healthy state of being for women," Obregon said. "It's not a disease. Pregnancy for most women isn't a threat."

Brauer pointed out that "basic health care is that which is needed to sustain the life of a person, and sex is an optional activity."

Besides, she added, birth control pills can work against good health, including what she says is the "No. 1 problem, blood clots." She also points to problems of Type 2 diabetes, breast cancer, weight gain and osteoporosis.

While Planned Parenthood's objections are expected, pressure from other corners also has Brauer concerned. Specifically she cited "legal pressure from the boards of pharmacy" and state legislation.

"I think there are nine states now that demand that pharmacists have to give out the 'morning-after' pill," she said. That includes Illinois, which overturned its previous policy allowing conscientious objection. "Prior to that time," she said, "Illinois had the strongest conscience laws on the books."

On a wider scale, Sen. Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., and Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., on June 6 introduced in Congress the Access to Birth Control (ABC) Act which would make it illegal for a pharmacy to refuse to fill birth control prescriptions. The bill calls for penalties of up to \$500,000 for noncompliance.

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