GWU’s health insurance plan covers contraception for women

By Daina Klimanis

This fall, George Washington University began providing contraceptive coverage in its student health insurance plan after public interest and women’s health advocate groups composed a demand letter on behalf of female George Washington law students, part of a larger trend to require health insurance companies to cover birth control.

A 1998 Maryland law - the first of its kind - mandated insurers cover contraception. The university has covered contraception for years under its insurance plan, which currently services about 2,000 members, university health services Primary Care Coordinator Paulette Smith said.

Bills in Congress, if passed, may require all insurers to do the same.

Supporters of mandatory contraceptive coverage argued that excluding contraceptives from a health insurance policy is sex discrimination against women and therefore illegal.

These groups became involved after George Washington law student Amy Moses, 27, became concerned that the university health plan did not cover prescription contraceptives, which can cost $300 to $700 annually. She received support from other organizations and fellow students, whose petitions were included in the demand letter.

“We believe this could be the beginning of a tidal wave of change of policy across the country. There are probably hundreds if not thousands of universities that are in violation of the[sex discrimination] law right now,” said Leslie Brueckner, staff attorney for Trial Lawyers for Public Justice, one of the groups that signed the letter. “We don’t have any current plans to go forward against anyone, but we do have plans to pursue a campaign.”

Other organizations to cosign the letter included The National Women’s Law Center and Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

The groups supported their argument with the court case Erickson v. Bartell Drug Co., in which the court ruled an employer could not exclude contraceptives from an otherwise comprehensive employer’s health insurance plan.

The groups also advised university officials that not covering contraceptives violated Title IX of the federal Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits sex discrimination by federally funded educational institutions.

The Washington Post quoted Richard A. Weitzner, George Washington associate general counsel, as saying the old George Washington health insurance plan did not include contraceptives because they did not meet any major medical needs. The university did not violate sex-discrimination laws, he said.

John Brennan, a spokesman for Planned Parenthood, said a number of health insurance policies favor men.

“Most insurance policies cover Viagra but don’t cover contraception,” he said. “That’s a glaring disparity.”

However, some disagree that not providing contraceptive coverage would be sex discrimination. In Erickson, the employer argued contraceptives are different from other forms of medication.

Alaine Holiday, a freshman history major, agrees.

“No one needs to have sex,” Holiday said. “You sometimes need to get rid of a headache, but you don’t need to have sex.” However, doctors do prescribe birth control pills and injections to women regardless of their sexual activity to treat medical conditions such as acne, cramps, irregular
periods, ovarian cysts and endometriosis, which can cause infertility.

Holiday said she would be upset if she had to pay more money for health insurance because it covered contraceptives.

The cost of the federal government’s health insurance plan did not increase after including contraceptives, but, according to Planned Parenthood, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce estimated the cost would rise.

Nevertheless, many students do not consider contraceptive coverage a matter of sex discrimination and think it should be available through every university plan.

“A college should invest in the health of its students, which is not a matter of male or female, but a matter of overall well-being,” said Julie Schechter, a freshman criminology and criminal justice major.

Sophomore letters and sciences major Naureen Anwar said schools cannot ignore such a major aspect of student life.

“That’s what schools do: they teach people to be responsible,” she said. “At least some people are being responsible [by seeking contraceptives]. They should support that.”