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HHS, Plan B & Scientism

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 8, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius yesterday overruled the Food and Drug Administration?s decision to make Plan-B, the morning-after pill, available without a prescription to any woman of child-bearing age. Sebelius?s decision is a victory for common sense and it is not, as it is being portrayed, a defeat for science. It is only a defeat for scientism, the reduction of science to that status of an ideology, an "ism."

Plan B is currently available without a prescription to any woman aged 17 or over. Anyone younger than that needs a prescription. The FDA?s recommendation would have allowed girls as young as 11 to purchase the drug in any drug store without any parental consent or doctor?s prescription. ?There is adequate and reasonable, well-supported, and science-based evidence that Plan B One-Step is safe and effective and should be approved for nonprescription use for all females of child-bearing potential,? FDA Administrator Margaret Hamburg said in a statement.

Women?s advocacy groups were also quick to denounce Sebelius. From this morning?s Washington Post: [1]

> ?We are outraged that this administration has let politics trump science,? said Kirsten Moore of the Reproductive Health Technologies Project, a Washington-based advocacy group. ?This administration is unwilling to stand up to any controversy and do the right thing for women?s health. That?s shameful.?

I am not a parent and I know that I am overly protective by nature. So, last night, when I got news of the HHS decision, I called my favorite liberal Catholic who is also a parent to ask what he thought of the rule. He agreed that no parent wants their eleven or twelve year old to be able to go to a store and find a ?fix? for sexual activity without the involvement of a parent or a counselor or somebody who is capable of recognizing that pregagncy is not exclusively a medical phenomenon to be treated by drugs. It is an event of enormous consequence in a young life, the kind of thing that needs to be addressed emotionally, not just pharmaceutically, with follow-up concern about the underlying issue: What the hell is a twelve year old doing having sex?

Ah, but the science. If anything shows the impoverishment of mind that afflicts a certrain type of contemporary liberal, Ms. Moore?s comments above are Exhibit A. This is not science but scientism, the idea that philosophic questions of values, concern for the uniqueness of each individual and their familial and social circumstances, the ethical belief that there are things that can be done but which ought not to be done, all are swept away because some lab technician proves there are no medical side effects. I have had recourse to this felicitous phrase of Leon Weiseltier?s before: ?There is not a chart in the world that explains the role of charts in the world.? Science tells us many things, but it cannot exempt itself from philosophic concerns about the significance of its data.

Weiseltier was writing about the ?science? behind the book ?The Bell Curve? which ?demonstrated? that the lower test scores of black Americans on standardized tests and other measures of human aptitude were the result of genetic differences. Whatever the ?scientific? basis for such claims, ?The Bell Curve? was morally repulsive and, in the event, evidence not of the innate intellectual inferiority of blacks but of the ability of ?science? to be

contorted to justify any claim you want.

Let us consider another instance. Here is this from Wikipedia: ?The Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (CHSL) is a private, non-profit institution with research programs focusing on cancer, neurobiology, plant genetics, genomics and bioinformatics.? It certainly sounds impressive and I am sure that much of the work done at CHSL improves the human condition. But, in the early part of the last century, one of the scientists at CHSL, Harry Laughlin, designed a model law that was adopted by the Commonwealth of Virginia. The law provided for the forced sterilization of mentally retarded citizens by the government with the expressed object of eliminating them from the gene pool. The law was upheld in the notorious 1927 Supreme Court decision Buck v. Bell. There, scientific experts combined with legal experts to reach the obvious conclusion that the state had the right to practice eugenics. Of course, Josef Mengele eventually gave eugenics a bad name but anyone who thinks that invoking scientific and legal expertise is the end of any argument does not have to look further than the Court?s chilling decision.

According to the Post, ?The decision [by HHS] shocked and angered the doctors, health advocates, family-planning activists, lawmakers and others who supported relaxing the restrictions to help women, including teenagers, prevent unwanted pregnancies.? First, it should be noted that an eleven year old or a twelve year old is not yet even a ?teenager.? But, ?Shocked?? Let these people be shocked by Buck v. Bell ? and ?family-planning advocates? should consult the life of Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood, who was quite open about her eugenic goals for birth control. Let them be shocked by Sanger?s commitment to eliminating inferior humans. (There is a reason the most famous picture of Sanger shows her addressing a Ku Klux Klan rally. As I have noted before, she put the ?hood? into Planned Parenthood.) Let these champions of science be ?shocked? by the racist ?science? of ?The Bell Curve.?

The HHS decision is not about politics trumping science. It is about common sense putting sensible limits upon what science has made possible. It is about recognizing that eleven year olds need supervision. It is about making rules that reflect the particularity of circumstances not the generality of what is scientifically possible.

Perhaps there is one sense in which politics ?trumped? science, but it has nothing to do with the Administration?s desire to avoid a conflict with these advocates and activists. If I were Secretary Sebelius, and I was charged with making this decision and explaining it to the President, I would be mindful that for President Obama, there is nothing abstract about the complex choices and challenges facing teenage girls. The man is a Dad and Malia is fourteen and Sasha will be eleven next year. I would not want to go to this man who is so obviously devoted to his daughters and say, ?Oh, by the way, we passed a new rule so that your girls can, without your knowledge or permission, go terminate a pregnancy with all the parental oversight they would need to buy a package of Twizzlers.? I do not know Barack Obama personally, but my hunch is he would look at anyone making such a suggestion, no matter how much science they could muster, and say, ?Are you crazy??

How does such craziness prosper? If you live within your own echo chamber long enough, the mind dulls. If you rely solely for your news on Fox or on MSNBC, your opinions will be shaped, some would say distorted, by the editorial bias to which you are subjecting yourself. And, if you believe your own bumper stickers about ?politics trumping science? you will have lost the capacity for humane assessment. I see this on the left and I see this on the right. I see it amongst very smart people, indeed, the affliction is rarely found among the less educated for whom common sense is their lodestar. I am not an anti-elitist. I do not denigrate the achievements of higher education. But, I do understand that there are varieties of idiocy that are only available to the very well informed. Those who live within the world of advocacy are especially susceptible to the danger of becoming provincial in their worldview: They know their field, and their field may include much to know, but they lose sight of the bigger picture and, because of their expertise, common sense is often the first to escape their field of vision. If such an observation makes me anti-elitist, I welcome the charge. Better to be sane and common than clever and morally stupid.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/obama-administration-refuses-to-relax-plan-b-restrictions/2011/12/07/gIQAF5HicO_story.html