Pharmacists Prescribing Birth Control in Oregon
Transdermal & Oral Contraceptives Available OTC? Not Exactly

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INTRODUCTION
As of January 1, 2016, pharmacists in Oregon are bringing in the New Year with permission to write prescriptions for birth control. Introduced with Oregon HB 2879 and HB 3343, state law now authorizes Oregon pharmacists to prescribe and dispense oral and transdermal contraceptives to women aged 18 years or older, and to those younger than 18 who have received a previous prescription for oral or transdermal birth control from a physician. In addition, the law also allows for the prescription to include a 12-month supply all at once instead of a single month or 3-month supply.

Introduction of this new law means Oregon is now one of two states in the U.S. that permits pharmacists to prescribe birth control, joining California. Oregon, however, remains the first state to effectuate such law, as California's SB 493 signed into law in 2013, allows for pharmacist to have this authority but currently lacks the implementation of appropriate measures to do so. With this legislative change in Oregon, many supporters say this state is closer towards initiatives to allow over-the-counter availability of contraceptives, a highly controversial and charged debate.

ROLE OF THE PHARMACIST
It should not be overlooked that in this unique expansion of the role of pharmacists comes a great deal of responsibility. Before women in Oregon who seek birth control can do so, they must fill out a health questionnaire and receive regular blood pressure checks. Once the pharmacist determines there is an absence of contraindications and determines the use of contraceptives will be effective and safe, a prescription can be written by the pharmacist.

Fiona Karbowicz, RPh, a consultant pharmacist for the Oregon State Board of Pharmacy, explains in Pharmacy Times that the health questionnaire was derived from an algorithm in a birth control direct access study conducted by researchers from the University of Washington and published in the Journal of the American Pharmacist Association (JAPhA) in 2006. This study sought to establish a collaborative drug therapy protocol to screen and counsel women for safe use of hormonal contraceptives prescribed by community pharmacists.
In addition to administering the questionnaire, the law mandates that pharmacists attend a 5-hour requisite continuing education course to prepare them for prescribing birth control.\(^1\)

**PUBLIC RESPONSE**

Although widely supported, one popular morning television show expressed doubt on whether pharmacists had the expertise to care for patients in regards to contraception. In response, the American Society of Health-Systems Pharmacist (ASHP) officially published a statement online saying, “Pharmacists are the medication-use experts and are specifically trained to help patients use their medications safely and appropriately. Today's pharmacists are trained and licensed to provide a number of additional services including initiating and modifying drug therapy, conducting health and wellness testing, helping patients manage chronic conditions [and] helping patients understand and manage their medications. Pharmacists are highly educated and trained healthcare professionals who are willing and able to provide vital care for those in need.”\(^3\)

**SUPPORT FOR EXPANDED ACCESS**

It has been no secret that there has long been support for legislation like this in regards to expanding access to health care services to women. Organizations like the American Medical Association (AMA) in 2013 and the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ACOG) as far back as 2012 have long endorsed their support for increased access to contraception with goals to move these medications over-the-counter (OTC).\(^4\) A January 2016 Statement from Dr. Mark DeFrancesco, current President of ACOG has most recently expressed that the law change in Oregon is not enough, “Birth control is an essential part of women's health care, and OTC status would help more women benefit from the ability to control their own reproductive health… Requiring a pharmacist to prescribe and dispense oral contraceptives only replaces one barrier — a physician’s prescription — with another.”\(^5\) However, Oregon State Board of Pharmacy executive director Marcus Watt also believes this law will greatly benefit women living in more rural areas of Oregon, who sometimes “wait up to 18 weeks to see a provider.”\(^1\)

**MORAL CONSCIOUS**

With these recent changes in Oregon Law regarding pharmacists, some are asking if this is the right direction pharmacy practice should head and will this put some pharmacists in a position in which they would violate their conscience. In answering these questions, the president of the Christian Pharmacy Fellowship International (CPF), pharmacist Fred Eckel shared these words on the matter, “Some pharmacists may have moral concerns with birth control medications. However, because in this case the Oregon legislation is permissive, I do not see that the law creates a moral dilemma
since a pharmacist who may not be comfortable prescribing oral contraceptives does not have to participate. This new opportunity is consistent with the expanded role being proposed for pharmacists so the debate should focus on whether it is an appropriate role for pharmacists rather than any moral issue.” Eckel also reflected a very similar stance to that of ASHP’s statement, “The real question is, ‘Are pharmacists equipped to handle this responsibility?’ Without a doubt using today's curriculum, pharmacists are more than well equipped to take on this role in healthcare management.”

These recent changes in Oregon and previously in California show the nation that pharmacists are more than capable of delivering the needs of women in access to care. Despite the remaining 48 states still without legislation expanding pharmacists roles in contraceptive prescribing, there is no doubt that these changes in Oregon were accomplished due to the power of advocacy, and the voice of pharmacists and pharmacy students supporting legislation designed to increase patient access and utilize the skills of today’s pharmacists.

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References:


