



Health insurance for the unborn

1 Introduction

The Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) was introduced in the United States in 1997. Its purpose is to provide health care for children in families which do not have health insurance but are ineligible for Medicaid (health insurance for the very poor). Currently CHIP allows states to provide health care coverage to low-income children from birth until the age of 19. The National Center for Health Statistics reported that US infant mortality rate fell by 3% from 1998 to 1999, partly in response to more women getting prenatal care. However, an estimated 10.9 million women of childbearing age still do not have health insurance.¹

2 What the US government proposes

The Bush administration has recently proposed that states be allowed to extend eligibility to the unborn, to ensure that all pregnant women have access to prenatal care, labor and delivery services. These services are important for the well-being of both mother and child.

3 Ethical analysis

The American Academy of Pediatrics specifies that a commitment to the well-being of children begins at conception and continues until early adulthood². Health Secretary Tommy Thompson has reiterated that the purpose of the proposed change is to provide prenatal care to all pregnant women, and to ensure a healthy start for all children. His spokesman, Bill Pierce, denied the changes were part of an anti-abortion agenda, but confirmed that it represented a step forward for those who believe the foetus has a right to life³.

However, pro-abortion groups have reacted angrily, claiming it is an attack on abortion rights:

- "The real goal is to establish a legal precedent for granting personhood to fetuses." (Laurie Rubiner, vice president of the National Partnership for Women and Families⁴)
- "It obviously undermines the principle of Roe v Wade and suggests that women's health interests can be overridden by the status of the fetus." (Regan Ralph, vice president for health at the National Women's Law Center⁵)

¹ Maggie Fox, Reuters Newsroom Thursday 31 January 2002; also Foster S. "Providing prenatal care helps fetuses and women", Detroit News 13/2/02

² American Academy of Pediatrics, Council on Child and Adolescent Health, "Age Limits of Pediatrics (Policy Statement RE8116)" <http://www.aap.org/policy/02031.html>

³ Borger J. "Bush plans health coverage for unborn", The Guardian, 7 July 2001

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ Foster S. "Providing prenatal care helps fetuses and women", Detroit News 13/2/02



- “This is a transparent ploy to undermine birth control and abortion rights by granting ‘personhood’ to embryos and fetuses.” (Kim Gandy, president-elect of NOW⁶)

The proposed move will guarantee a minimum level of health care for women who choose to carry their pregnancies to term. But because it recognises the humanity of the unborn child, abortion supporters fear it will threaten abortion services. It therefore becomes apparent that, for the US pro-choice lobby, anything that benefits a pregnant woman who chooses to give birth is a threat to women’s ‘rights’⁷.

This debate follows other recent events which show that recognition of the right to life of the unborn child is conducive justice, including:

- a mother in South Carolina, US, being found guilty of killing her unborn child by smoking crack cocaine during her pregnancy⁹.
- a Melbourne man being charged with manslaughter of twin babies after attacking his heavily pregnant ex-girlfriend¹⁰.

⁶ Gandy K, “NOW President-elect Kim Gandy Blasts Bush Plan to Cover Fetuses, Ignore Moms”, NOW Press Release July 6 2001.

⁷ Foster S, “Providing prenatal care helps fetuses and women”, Detroit News 13/2/02

⁹ The Journal of Clinical Ethics, Fall 2001, Vol 12 No 3, pg 324.

¹⁰ AAP, 30th January 2002

http://www.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,4057,3682984%255E2,00.html