

May 22, 2011

Dear Members of Congress:

I write in support of efforts to ensure that the Department of Defense's Military Health System, which provides health care and insurance for members of the Armed Forces and their families, provides military servicewomen and dependents with coverage for abortion in cases of rape and incest.

Under current law, the Department of Defense is barred from providing coverage for abortion except where the pregnant woman's life is endangered. Unlike other federal bans on abortion coverage, the military ban *provides no exception for cases of rape or incest*. The current policy is shameful and should be modified. Our servicewomen, who serve and sacrifice for their country, should not have worse health care benefits than others in the civilian population who rely on the government for their insurance coverage.

I served as an officer in the United States Air Force as a physician from 1986 to 2006. My assignments included multiple overseas tours in Japan, England and Germany. My final assignment, prior to retirement as a Colonel in 2006, was as Chief, Medical Operations Division for the Headquarters, United States Air Forces in Europe (HQ USAFE) at Ramstein Air Base, Germany. In this assignment, I was responsible for oversight of the quality of care provided at Air Force hospitals and clinics in the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, and Turkey.

Additionally, as Chief of Medical Operations at HQ USAFE, I was significantly involved in the initial development of the Sexual Assault Response and Prevention program for our bases throughout Europe. Improvements in the area of prevention and reporting of assaults, and in the provision of emergency contraception, are commendable. However, as you are well aware, military sexual assaults remain unacceptably high.

In particular, the climate of fear and intimidation leading to under-reporting remains an intractable problem, with the FY2010 SAPRO report estimating that only 14% of victims of sexual assault report this crime. This report also shows that the vast majority of victims are female, under age 25, and from the junior enlisted ranks. These young women usually serve far from home, with no close family and friend support systems to help them through such a traumatic experience. When a servicewoman is raped, becomes pregnant, and chooses to end the pregnancy caused by an act of violence, she should not have to scramble to find the funds to pay for the care she needs. She should have access to the same medical benefits that other women insured by our government already have.

Our military women, and the wives and daughters of active duty troops, deserve more comprehensive reproductive health care than the current policy provides. They have demonstrated their commitment to the country they are willing to die to protect. Congress should demonstrate its commitment to their service and sacrifice.

Sincerely yours,

Katherine Scheirman, M. D.  
Colonel (Ret.), USAF, MC