The Chastity Beltway

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It’s like The Discovery Channel: The new king of the jungle always marks his territory in order to keep the enemies at bay. So it’s only natural that Republican heavyweights cried wolf recently over a long-awaited condom report by the National Institutes of Health. After the federally mandated study found that rubbers are less than 100 percent effective -- not exactly breaking news -- GOPers promptly fell over themselves to call a press conference, puff out their plumage and pronounce condoms unreliable protection from HIV and other STDs, in particular HPV. The alternative? All together now: “Abstinence.” That the CDC has for decades urged condoms as risk reduction became, in a single interpretation by abstinence adherents, a big fat lie to promote sex among teens.

Huh? It all started with Tom Coburn, MD, a former Gingrich House Republican from Oklahoma now returned to his family practice and moonlighting for Focus on the Family. In addition to pushing for mandatory testing and contact tracing, he tried two years ago to add limited-efficiency warning labels to condom packages -- which safer-sex and birth-control advocates viewed as an insidious sabotage of condom confidence -- as part of the Breast and Cervical Cancer Treatment Act. In order to push the bill through without amendment, lawmakers offered the NIH effectiveness study. Now that the results are in, Coburn is calling out from the dust bowl for the immediate resignation of the new CDC director, Jeffrey Koplan, MD, saying the study was evidence of an “intentional cover-up of the HPV epidemic.” Right-wing conspiracy, anyone?

The CDC’s attempts to spin are inept even by its own bland standards. “Today’s report doesn’t say condoms are ineffective,” reads a press release. “Male latex condoms, when used correctly and consistently, are highly effective in protecting against HIV.” They showed slightly more resolve when denying that Koplan has plans to step down. But with the CDC’s former AIDS higher-ups Bush wacked, it remains to be seen whether the agency will fall prey to anti-sex ed fervor from its funding source (the feds). Don’t change the channel -- you might miss a stampede.

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