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## **Bill to allow moral objections**

BOISE -- Eight lawmakers are working on legislation that would allow all health care workers to decline to participate in patient care or services if they have religious, ethical or moral objections to the procedures. If passed, doctors, nurses or pharmacists would not have to participate in abortions, dispense drugs such as the emergency contraceptive medication

Plan B or engage in embryonic stem cell research if they believe doing so violates their beliefs and values. Rep. Tom Loertscher, R-Iona, a co-sponsor of the legislation, said it's crucial to provide what he termed "conscience protections" for all health care providers. "I think it's important to protect that in law, especially when there are some that would want to take that away," he said.

Bill co-sponsor and Senate Majority Caucus Chairman Russ Fulcher, R-Meridian, said the legislation's intent isn't to limit access to drugs such as Plan B, but to safeguard employees who want to exercise their beliefs. "The only thing this does is impact (abortion) scenarios," he said. "It's more an employee rights issue."

In 1973, Idaho lawmakers passed a law providing limited protections to doctors and hospitals regarding participation in abortions. No one at that time envisioned a morning-after pill or embryonic stem cell research. That's why lawmakers should step in now, said bill co-sponsor Rep. Erik Simpson, R-Idaho Falls. "I think the time is right for this kind of legislation," Simpson said.

The bill has been printed and was ready for a public hearing in the Senate State Affairs Committee, but lawmakers pulled it back to make revisions and clarify some definitions in the bill's text. Barbara Jorden, a lobbyist for the Idaho Trial Lawyers Association, called it a wise move. "It was really poorly done," she said.

In addition to providing protections, the legislation also would have provided civil immunity to employees who refused to provide care that they thought violated their moral or ethical principles. According to Jorden, that clause basically means employees will receive protection for not doing their jobs and leaves patients with no recourse if they're denied care. "It means the patient is left out in the cold," she said. "There's no protection in here at all for the patient."

Fulcher, however, said the civil immunity language was inserted to prevent an employee from being fired for observing his or her faith and values, not to limit a patient's rights. "There will be no impact on a patient's legal rights," said Fulcher, who maintained the civil immunity language will be clearer in the new version.

The updated bill will be introduced next week in the Senate State Affairs Committee. Loertscher sponsored a similar bill last year that dealt specifically with pharmacists and dispensing medication. That bill stalled in the Senate. Co-sponsors of this year's proposal say they're confident of passage. "I think (this year's legislation) is a little more relaxed," Loertscher said. Fulcher agreed, saying people will see that lawmakers aren't trying to deny access to medications or procedures. "Once the language comes out, it's going to be a lot less offensive to people," he said.