

US firms given religious right to deny the Pill

By Harriet Alexander
in New York

BUSINESSES in the US will be able to deny insurance to pay for a woman's contraception under an amendment announced yesterday by Donald Trump's administration.

Companies will be able to cite religious or moral objections to birth control, and deny the funding to their employees - a new policy which unpicks a key provision of ObamaCare.

The move was greeted with anger from reproductive rights advocates, and praise from conservative Christian activists.

It remained unclear how many women would lose contraception coverage and which companies would use the exemptions, but Cecile Richards, president of Planned Parenthood, said: "The Trump administration just took direct aim at birth control coverage for 62 million women." The government claims only 120,000 women will lose their coverage. California's Democratic attorney general pledged to fight to protect the mandate from circumvention.

The president, who criticised the birth control mandate in last year's election campaign, won strong support from conservative Christian voters. The Republican president signed an executive order in May asking

for rules that would allow religious groups to deny their employees insurance coverage for services they oppose on religious grounds.

Yesterday's announcement increases that rule to apply to all businesses. "All Americans should have the freedom to peacefully live and work consistent with their faith without fear of government punishment," the conservative Christian legal activist group Alliance Defending Freedom said in a statement. "Health and Hu-

£1bn

The amount estimated that women saved in oral contraceptive costs in 2013

man Services has issued a balanced rule that respects all sides - it keeps the contraceptive mandate in place for most employers and now provides a religious exemption," said Mark Rienzi, one of the lawyers for the Little Sisters of the Poor, an order of Roman Catholic nuns that previously challenged the mandate in court.

The National Women's Law Center, which estimates that in 2013 the contraception requirement saved women \$1.4 billion (£1 billion) in oral contraceptive costs, has vowed to challenge the administration in court.

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