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OUR VIEW

LAW WOULD ENDANGER TEEN HEALTH

If you can't get your teenager to tell you what she ate at school during lunch, chances are slim she will share with you that she suspects she may have a sexually transmitted disease.

Medical experts know that teens who communicate with their parents often make the best decisions, but they also know that teens who don't share important information with their parents need medical care and advice as well.

Why it matters

A state Senate proposal would require minors to get parental consent for a broad range of medical care.

A GOP proposal would foolishly destroy that possibility of care without parental consent in Minnesota. The bill, sponsored by Sen. David Hann, a Republican from Eden Prairie, would require parental consent before minors could seek treatment for pregnancy,

sexually transmitted diseases or drug and alcohol abuse.

This drastic plan would undo a 40-year-old law that allows minors to see doctors without parental consent and would set Minnesota apart from other states — reeling us backward. No states that have such laws or are proposing them contain wording so broad in scope, according to the Guttmacher Institute, which follows sexual and reproductive health issues.

The Senate bill should be stamped dead on arrival (it's been approved by a Senate committee), and the House needs to reject producing a companion bill.

A state health department official says the results of such legislation could include higher rates of STD infection — Blue Earth County already is tops in that category — and unintended pregnancies, unchecked drug and alcohol abuse, premature births or other complications, and long-term health problems from untreated conditions. And each of those would drive up health care costs.

The American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics have policies that support minors' access to contraceptives, and U.S. Supreme Court decisions have upheld minors' consent to contraceptives and abortions.

The proposed legislation's extremism is even more obvious when considering the bill would make an exception for incest and sexual or physical abuse victims at the hands of a parent or guardian — but they would need to get a judge's OK before seeing a doctor without parental consent. So after that teen is molested by a family member, she's supposed to go out and find a judge to give her permission to see a doctor. Making a teen jump through these hoops to get help is blatantly cruel and unethical, not to mention that taking time to go to court might make it impossible to get evidence proving the assault.

Minnesota's existing law prevents doctors from disclosing medical information to parents unless the patient agrees or the health issue poses immediate harm. Any parent will tell you they'd prefer to know the reasons why their child wants medical attention. But if it comes down to the child deciding not to get needed medical attention because she is forced to reveal why, then most parents are going to want the child to get the help — with or without their permission.