

Women's Health
Legislation
in the
106th Congress

1999-2000

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	iii
Introduction	vii
 Part I: Women's Health Research	
Alcohol/Fetal Alcohol Syndrome	3
Autoimmune Diseases	5
Breast Cancer	9
Cardiovascular Diseases	13
Cervical Cancer/HPV	16
DES	18
Environmental Health	20
HIV/AIDS Research	23
Ovarian Cancer	27
Treatment of Women Scientists	29
 Part II: Preventive Health Services	
Adolescent Pregnancy	33
Domestic Violence	36
Eating Disorders	38
Family Planning Informed Consent	41
Health Status of Women of Color	43
HIV/AIDS Prevention	47
International Women's Health	51
Mid-life and Older Women	55
Osteoporosis	58
Reproductive Health Issues	60
Sexually Transmitted Diseases	61
Smoking	65
Veteran Women's Health	67
Women's Health Offices	69
 Part III: Access to Health Care Coverage	
Breast and Cervical Cancer Treatment	73
Bone Mass Measurement	75
Clinical Trials	77
Contraceptive Drugs and Services	79
Family Caregivers/Long-Term Care	81
Genetic Discrimination	83
Mammography Screening	85
Mastectomy Hospital Stays	88
Mental Health Services	90
Obstetricians-Gynecologists	93
Prescription Drug Coverage for Older Women	95
Reconstructive Breast Surgery	97
 Appendices	
Appendix I: Action on Women's Health Legislation in the 106th Congress	101
Appendix II: Selected Women's Health Bills Introduced in the 106th Congress	106

Introduction

The effort to improve women's health has probably received more attention from Congress during the 1990s than any other women's issue. Led by members of the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues, this effort has been bipartisan.

Since 1990, Caucus efforts have resulted in the appropriation of several billion dollars for women's health research and prevention programs. This has led to the creation of several important public health programs designed to make mammograms and Pap tests more widely available, to ensure the safety and accuracy of mammography screening, and to prevent infertility through better screening and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases.

The majority of women's health bills considered by Congress between 1990 and 1996 were first introduced as part of the Women's Health Equity Act (WHEA), which combined more than 30 women's health bills into one omnibus package. First introduced in 1990, revised WHEA packages were reintroduced in three successive Congresses between 1991 and 1996. In all, 27 WHEA bills were enacted.

Beginning in 1997, the Congressional Caucus for Women's Issues decided to incorporate Caucus-backed provisions into legislation already under consideration by Congress. The strategy was pursued during the 105th and 106th Congresses. To that end, the Caucus established a number of bipartisan legislative teams charged with developing an agenda and legislative strategy for their areas of emphasis.

Women's Health Legislation in the 106th Congress provides background information on a range of women's health issues from autoimmune diseases to HIV/AIDS prevention to insurance coverage for breast and cervical cancer treatment. It is not meant to be an encyclopedic guide to women's health topics but rather a report on those health issues considered by the 106th Congress.

The first section of the report focuses on women's health research covering such topics as alcohol, autoimmune diseases, breast cancer, cardiovascular diseases, DES, environmental health, HIV/AIDS, ovarian cancer, and the treatment of women scientists. During

the 106th Congress, funding for biomedical research at the National Institutes of Health received unprecedented increases. Additionally, the 106th Congress enacted legislation to expand lupus research, as well as legislation to better coordinate autoimmune diseases research.

The second section of the report focuses on preventive health services for women and covers adolescent pregnancy, domestic violence, eating disorders, family planning informed consent, minority health, mid-life and older women, HIV/AIDS, international women's health, osteoporosis, reproductive health, smoking, veteran women's health, and women's health offices. The 106th Congress was successful in reauthorizing the Ryan White Care Act to include a special emphasis on women and children. Additionally, the Violence Against Women Act was reauthorized and expanded to include several new programs aimed at reaching a greater number of individuals. The 106th Congress also addressed the global HIV/AIDS epidemic by enacting legislation to create an international HIV/AIDS trust fund under the auspices of the World Bank. Progress also was seen on veteran women's health issues, as well as minority health.

The third section of the report focuses on health care coverage, detailing breast and cervical cancer treatment, bone mass measurement, clinical trials, contraceptive drugs and services, family caregivers and long-term care, genetic discrimination, mammography screening, mastectomy hospital stays, mental health services, access to obstetricians-gynecologists, prescription drugs, and reconstructive breast surgery. While Members of the 106th Congress pressed for action on prescription drug coverage for seniors and a patients' bill of rights, an agreement could not be reached prior to adjournment. The 106th Congress was successful in enacting legislation to aid federal employees and retirees in purchasing long-term care insurance, as well as legislation to authorize a new National Family Caregivers Support program and legislation to provide tax credits for family caregivers and those who purchase long-term care insurance. In a major victory for women's health advocates, the 106th Congress enacted legislation to give states the option of providing treatment under Medicaid for women diagnosed with breast or cervical cancer through a federal screening program.

The report also includes two appendices: the first provides a summary of all legislative action on women's health in the 106th Congress and the second provides a selected listing of bills pertaining to women's health that were introduced in the 106th Congress.

Overall, the 106th Congress saw progress on a number of issues affecting women's health, while leaving several major issues—prescription drug coverage for seniors and patient protection legislation—to be decided by the 107th Congress.