The Not-So-Bitter Pill

The question of who controls health-care costs has been endlessly discussed, but it seems that we’ve all missed the answer: the media. In recent weeks, we have watched the cost of birth-control pills rise dramatically: Three weeks ago, in the infancy of the Sandra Fluke fracas, we were told that the annual cost was, at most, $600; then Fluke upped the ante, reporting $1,000 per year in her congressional testimony; and finally, her figure was widely misreported as being $3,000 per annum. This last spike seems to have been the messy byproduct of Fluke’s claim that $3,000 would be the cost over her three-year stay at Georgetown Law.

Fluke’s figure seems to have been plucked from thin air. Planned Parenthood estimates the monthly cost at between $15 and $50, which translates to $160 to $600 per year. If we were to take their maximum figure and run with it, we’d still be well below Fluke’s oft-repeated claim. But even Planned Parenthood’s price is on the high end. As has been widely reported, both Target and Walmart (and their online iterations) have been selling generic birth-control pills for $9 per month in 41 states since 2007 – equivalent to the cost of three cheap coffees at Starbucks. (The cost in the nine remaining states is around $27, or $324 per year. For the difference, we can thank those states’ regulations making it illegal to sell prescription drugs as loss leaders.)

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