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Friday, Feb. 9, 2007 12:20 PST

"Veronica Mars" needs sex ed

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This week's award for major disappointment during prime-time network programming goes to the generally talented crew over at "Veronica Mars," who egregiously and stupidly conflated emergency contraception and RU-486 in Tuesday's episode. (Apologies to [Bears](#) fans; I'm considering the week as beginning on Monday.) Think Progress [broke the news](#) before the episode aired, posting a screen grab of the CW network's description of the episode: "Veronica is hired by Bonnie, a promiscuous classmate, to find out who slipped her the morning after pill, causing her to have a miscarriage."

Who wrote this episode, FDA staffers circa 2005? The problems here are several: First, for crying out loud, [Plan B is not abortion](#); second, in the episode itself, Bonnie is actually dosed with the abortifacient RU-486, which is, of course, not at all the same as E.C.; and third, in the course of Veronica's investigation, the show suggests that RU-486 is fairly easy for any woman to obtain and sneak into her friend's food -- when, as Ann at [Feministing](#) noted this week, "clinics will not administer RU486 to any woman who has not had a pregnancy test and an ultrasound. They don't just hand this stuff over to any woman who asks." While it's certainly possible that in a rare instance a clinic would slip up in this regard, that possibility wasn't suggested by the episode. And given how tough it can be to score emergency contraception or access to surgical [abortion](#) in most parts of the country, I find the suggestion that RU-486 is so easy to come by especially hard to believe. Over in the comments at [Feministing](#), [Pandagon's](#) Amanda Marcotte [speculated](#), "Sounds like they wrote it for Plan B and then, when they found out that it does not cause a miscarriage, hastily rewrote it with RU-486."

Back to the problems: No. 4 is that the episode wasn't thorough in its depiction of RU-486, either, since RU-486 is usually just the first part of a two-drug chemical abortion process, the second part being [misoprostol](#), which is taken two days after RU-486 to induce uterine contractions. (If someone slipped that into Bonnie's food, too, the episode didn't cover it.) Fifth, while the CW did go back after the episode aired and correct the episode description, [replacing](#) the mention of the morning-after pill with RU-486, the episode's title is still "There's Got to Be a Morning After Pill." I like a '70s music reference as much as the next guy, but in a show whose target audience is young women, it really seems worth giving accurate reproductive health information priority over Maureen McGovern puns.

Some critics have also noted that calling the character Bonnie "promiscuous" seems loaded and judgmental in an awfully retro way. While this season of the show has established that her character has lots of sexual partners (and she hasn't really caught any more or less flak for that than her comparably active male peers have), I basically agree -- referring to a female character as promiscuous, especially when no other adjectives are used to describe her, does read like a value judgment rather than a neutral statement of fact, and I wish whatever lowly staffer penned the episode description had thought of another way to describe the character. Especially because, in the context of the episode description, we don't need to know about her sexual practices; she's pregnant, she miscarries, she suspects foul play -- why do we need to know upfront how many partners she has had? (The "promiscuous" part did have

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relevance in the episode itself, because Bonnie's pregnancy raises some ancillary paternity questions.) "Veronica Mars" has come under fire this season for an ongoing story line about a [serial rapist](#) and a campus women's group that hits on every ugly-feminist stereotype, and it really could stand to be smarter and more nuanced with its descriptions of peripheral female characters.

Television shows like "Mars" are, of course, entertainment, and no show should be anyone's sole source of medical (or other) information. But that doesn't mean viewers don't absorb messages from their programming, and as Think Progress pointed out this week, "'Veronica Mars' is extremely popular among young women, the very women who need accurate health information." Show creator Rob Thomas is clearly aware of this; earlier this year, he responded to criticism of the show's depictions of women by [saying](#), "You know, I'm remarkably defensive about this -- it gets under my skin like no other criticism. I'm the person who created Veronica. Veronica's far from perfect, but find me a better feminist role model on television, particularly for adolescent girls." Conflating RU-486 and the morning-after pill helps perpetuate widespread confusion about how each drug works, and that's not just a political misstep; it's a disservice to the show's viewers. I'm glad the CW saw fit to (partially) correct the episode description, but in this case, I'd like it to go one better: Issue an apology for the misinformation and pay for a few emergency-contraception PSAs to run during "Veronica Mars" commercial breaks. For a show that purports to present a role model for adolescent girls, it seems the least the network can do.

— Page Rockwell

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