

A Special Report:

Contraception Controversy

by Nancy Beezley
College Press Service

WASHINGTON — (CPS) — The safety of women is apparently the last thing in the mind of the drug industry. For a decade American drug companies have been peddling the birth control pill as a miraculous wonder drug, a doer of only good and the social savior of humanity.

But it seems the pill is somewhat less than that. Since the beginning of the year, a Senate committee and a Washington D. C. woman's liberation group have held investigations about the pill. Testimony indicates at very least the drug industry and the medical profession are guilty of deception and carelessness and at most that these groups are committing mass genocide.

It seems that what began as convenience for men, a casual prescription for physicians and supposed freedom for women—has meant only one thing to drug companies. The birth control pill equals money.

PILLS BIG BUSINESS

The drug industry is one of the most profitable industries in the country and the birth control pill is responsible for more than a small part of that profit. Drug companies spend more money promoting than researching the birth control pill.

In 1957, the birth control pill was tested on a group of Puerto Rican women. The study was done to test the effectiveness of the pill as a contraceptive, not to investigate its safety and health aspects. What didn't come out of that study is probably more indicative than what did. By the end of three years all women dropped out of the experiment. There were five deaths including three sudden deaths. No thorough analysis was made on why the women discontinued using the pill. Even though the sudden deaths suggest blood clots to the lung, the deaths were not revealed, and no autopsies were performed.

When the pill was put on the market in 1960, fewer than 200 women had taken oral contraceptives for more than a year.

One Indiana physician told Senate committee members, "Several near tragic examples of thromboembolism (a form of blood clotting) caused me to slow up my prescribing of contraceptive medication six years ago, and finally to cease totally prescribing the birth control pill some four years ago." He said he has seen women who take the pill with thrombophlebitis, skin pigmentation, weight gain, nausea, irritable bowel syndrome, backache, cancer of the breast, rheumatoid arthritis-like syndrome, monilial vaginitis, uterine fibroids, temporary and alarming hyper-tension, and women with abnormal thyroid and liver function tests.

COMMON SIDE EFFECTS

"But more than any other problems, I have seen women who are chronically tired, or depressed, or lacking in libido, or complaining of frequent migraine-like headaches, often of incapacitating nature. These symptoms may occur singly or apparently rather frequently together in the same woman," Ball said.

Barbara Seaman, author of *THE DOCTOR'S CASE AGAINST THE PILL*, said at the women's liberation hearing that three separate surveys indicate that one birth control pill user in three experiences depressant personality changes—changes to depression and fatigue. Physicians believe suicide, not blood clotting, is the leading cause of death among pill users, she said.

Besides the known side effects of oral contraception, there are many unexplored and unanswered potential effects including cancer, genetic damage and sterility.

Cancer has a latency period of from ten to thirty or more years. An assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Dr. Hugh Davis, told the senate committee that breast cancers have been induced in at least five different species of animals by currently marketed oral contraceptives. "Every important agent that has a carcinogenic (cancer causing) effect in humans has been shown to cause

cancer in animals." Milligram for milligram the synthetic chemicals used in the pills are 20-40 times as potent as the naturally occurring estrogens.

It isn't known what effect birth control pills have on the fetus, should a woman forget to take a pill and then take two the next day as the package instructs. Mrs. Seaman said it is also possible that, if a woman begins to take pills while nursing a child, that child may grow up sterile.

Dr. David Carr, Department of Anatomy at McMaster University, recommended to the Senate committee that all women who have never had a child and "have therefore never proven their fertility and women who have only one living child should be informed of the possibility of being relatively infertile for an indeterminate time following discontinuation of the oral contraceptives before they ever start taking them. No woman should be put on oral contraceptives until she has proven her fertility, unless there are medical mitigating circumstances."

MDs FAIL TO WARN

Even though the actual and potential side effects are so widespread, a survey by the D.C. women's liberation group indicates that most women are not forewarned by their physicians. Ball testified, "In my experience, most of the women that have seen me because of adverse effects from the pill have not been warned by the prescribing doctor that the pill can cause important side effects. In fact, many have been told after their side effect symptoms began, that the pill could not do this, and in fact, their doctors have often denied the obvious evidence even when discontinuing the pill resulted in elimination of the woman's problems."

Widespread use of oral contraceptives has given rise to health hazards on a scale "previously unknown to medicine." "Never have so many individuals taken such potent drugs with so little information available as to actual and potential hazards. It is medically unsound to administer such powerful synthetic hormones in order to achieve birth control objectives which can be reached by simpler means of greater safety...." Davis said.

The popularity of the pill has been due in great part to promotion by drug companies. Doctors often recommend birth control pills without seriously discussing with their patients other types of contraception.

Davis said the effectiveness of the pill is greatly overrated. "Even those who stay on the pill get pregnant at a one to three percent rate because of omission of one or two tablets or failure of the method itself." Some iud's provide a 99 percent protection against pregnancy and can be worn by 94 percent of women. Similar results occur with use of the diaphragm in a well-motivated population of women, he said.

Drug companies do what they can to downgrade all but oral contraceptives. Many medical school courses are taught by drug company representatives. Elaine Archer of the New York Women's Health Collective said at the women's liberation hearing that a few years ago drug companies bought up patents to several types of iud's (which, incidentally, are cheaper than birth control pills). The drug companies promoted birth control pills by marketing poor quality iud's and by not promoting the iud as a valid form of contraception.

PILL NOT SAFEST METHOD

Probably the safest and most effective form of population control is use of the iud or diaphragm to prevent contraception and back up use of therapeutic abortion to prevent unwanted birth. Japan and

Bulgaria use legal abortion, not oral contraception, to control population. Presently, the number of legal abortions in Japan and Eastern Europe plus the illegal abortions elsewhere prevent more births than all methods of contraception combined.

Even though abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy and under hospital conditions is medically safer than pregnancy, there are only about 10 states with "liberalized" abortion laws. In these states, abortion is permitted only in cases involving rape, incest, German measles and serious medical reasons.

Attorney Caroline Nickerson said at the women's liberation hearings that women with money can sometimes get an abortion for medical reasons by paying large psychiatric fees. The District of Columbia's abortion law was declared unconstitutional last November when the judge ruled that the woman has a right to control her own reproductive life.

But, if a woman does not have money, it is almost impossible for her to get a legal hospital abortion. Washington's only public hospital, D.C. General, refuses to perform abortions.

Of all the complications associated with pregnancy and childbearing, the principal cause of death is illegal abortion. According to testimony by a former executive director of the Population Crisis committee, Phyllis Piotrow, official statistics reveal a mortality rate associated with criminal abortion of 2.4 deaths per 100,000 live births for whites and 13.2 for non-whites. A physician testified that there is one death per 1000 abortions from criminal abortions performed out of hospitals by lay abortionists.

"If more freedom is given to the medical profession to perform legal abortions by liberalizing or eliminating present laws, many relatively safe abortions may well supplement the improved contraception that can hopefully be anticipated," William Draper Jr., honorary chairman of the Population Crisis Committee and member of the governing body of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, told the Senate committee.

WOMEN EXPLOITED

Legislators who refuse to let women control their own bodies, physicians who casually prescribe birth control, men who refuse to share the burden of contraception and drug companies that measure women in terms of profits are guilty of exploiting women. The drug industry is the biggest and most deliberate exploiter of women. Since the initial experimentation with the birth control pill, the drug industry has been careless and sometimes even deliberately deceptive.

Edmond Kassouf, M.D. told the Senate committee about systematic attempts to deny risks to pill users and to conceal adverse information by drug companies, the American Medical Association and the Food and Drug Administration. One drug company—G.D. Searle—has been responsible for two incidents in which the medical profession ignored, even denied, any connection between oral contraception and thromboembolism.

In 1962, reports on deaths from thromboembolism were given prematurely before all reports arrived. From evidence given at the Searle convened conference, the conference concluded there is no connection between oral contraception and thromboembolism.

In 1968, Searle sponsored a report in the American Medical Association (AMA) Journal which rebutted British figures

showing a relationship between oral contraception and thromboembolism. The Searle-sponsored report was the basis for the official AMA editorial in the same issue denying thromboembolism-pill associations.

99 per cent of the AMA Journal's \$10 million per year advertising revenue comes from drug companies. One half of the AMA revenue comes from drug company advertising, and the AMA does not check the validity and truth of the drug advertising.

Contrary to drug company advertising, for example, it is a myth that women who go off the pill experience an increase in fertility.

Kassouf charged drug manufacturers with failure to reveal to women the risks of the pill. About pamphlets put out by birth control pill manufacturers, Kassouf said, "Some of the pamphlets mislead and misinform; others are frankly dangerous, but all have one thing in common: They all seem to disparage the reader's right to know."

DOUBLE SEX STANDARD?

"Is there perhaps a sexual double standard or sex discrimination that works in this seeming insistence of our medical profession to force the pill on women rather than men? Is the pill safe enough for women, but a male contraceptive pill is not safe enough for men? The simple fact that women have the babies should not mean that they should be discriminated against by being the only ones subjected to chemical contraception. Is there anyone here that would guess how many men would take a male sterility pill if the list of possible side effects were made known in advance?...." one physician asked.

Coupled with prescription and promotion of the pill has been disregard for women. As one woman put it, "They never thought about what the pill would do to us women.... It is genocide on Black people, poor whites and women."

"For the first time in medicine's history, the drug industry has placed at our disposal a powerful, disease-producing chemical for use in the healthy rather than the sick," one doctor said. The drug industry seems to be much busier counting money than lives.

SORORITY NEWS

Beta Phi

On March 9, Beta Phi accepted twelve new pledges—Lucia Tomkins, Michele Crawford, Margaret Hulack, Dona Nelson, Diane Williams, Wanda Willis, Marilyn Green, Susie Le Mieux, Margie McClung, Jean Slaughter, Carol Vincent, Cindy Black. Michele Crawford was elected president of the pledge class and Margie McClung was elected treasurer.

After the new pledges were announced, the girls celebrated by singing, being thrown into the lake, and going on a scavenger hunt which culminated at Gus's where the girls were honored and the objects of the scavenger hunt shown.

Delta Delta Sorority

To strengthen the bonds of friendship and trust among women at UNCC is the goal of Delta Delta Sorority. With this in mind, all interested women are cordially invited to attend the Spring Rush Teas. These will be held Monday (April 13), and Wednesday (April 15) in the northwest lounge of the Union at 11:30.