

In support of this position you cite the fact that a reduction of the average age in which mothers gave birth in Britain and Australia was accompanied by a reduction in the birth defect known as Down's syndrome.

Dr. CARR. Yes, sir.

Senator McINTYRE. Do you know whether this reduction in the average age at which mothers gave birth in Britain and Australia was due to the use of birth control pills?

Dr. CARR. No, sir; I do not. It was just meant to illustrate the way in which such a thing could occur. I would like to enlarge on that, if I may.

Senator McINTYRE. Certainly.

Dr. CARR. The incidence of congenital defects is greatest at the extremes of maternal age, both in the younger and older women. Women at age 18, there is a high risk of producing abnormal offspring just as with women after the age of 40.

So if women concentrated their families during the period, say between 21 and 29, when congenital defects are at their least, this would produce a population effect of reducing congenitals in the population. I am not suggesting that the oral contraceptives are the ideal way of terminating a family. What I do suggest is they have done two things: One is they have made the public extremely contraceptive minded, much more so, I think, occurred when very good contraceptives were always available, as we heard this morning, diaphragms, and so forth. But the pills made people very contraceptive minded. So even if they do not use the pill as a means of limiting their family, they are now thinking about family limitations.

Second, it allows the woman, as Dr. Davis said in his testimony, a think period. If she, say, decides to terminate her family at the age of 35 but she is not sure that she really wants to terminate it finally, she could take oral contraceptives for a period of 2 years, think this out finally, and maybe then have a sterilization at the age of 37 or 38 years old. So I do not mean necessarily that would be the means of terminating her family, but it would be a way which women would think about this possibility.

Senator McINTYRE. Doctor, what proportion of all birth defects would you say that the Down's syndrome accounts for?

Dr. CARR. It is said that in most populations it occurs in one in 600 births.

Now, the overall instance of congenital defects varies from population to population and survey to survey. I think a fair figure is 2½ percent of all offspring born have a congenital defect which either impairs their ability to live a normal life or requires operative correction, so that obviously Down's syndrome or any chromosome abnormality represents only a small number of all congenital defects.

Down's syndrome is, first of all, the most common abnormality in birth with humans. If you take them all together they represent only one-half of 1 percent of the births, and if you consider congenital defects another 2½ percent on top of that, you could say perhaps one in six of all congenital defects are due to chromosome abnormality, the other five of the six are other causes, and that we do not know.

Senator McINTYRE. Is there any evidence that birth defects other than Down's syndrome have decreased in Britain and Australia?