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INTRODUCTION

There are few medical controversies that have stirred up as much public discussion as the safety of "The Pill"—the oral contraceptives. Why, then, this booklet?

The answer lies in the history of oral contraceptives. To begin with, these chemicals proved extraordinarily effective in preventing conception, and were hailed (with good reason) as a major advance in individual, national, and global birth control efforts. Second, the convenience and psychological and esthetic advantages of the Pill over older mechanical devices, the rhythm method, etc. rapidly made oral contraceptives popular with women, their sexual partners, and doctors alike, especially since the technical skill required to fit a diaphragm, e.g., was not required of the physician, who could now confidently manage the contraceptive needs of his patients by the simple use of his prescription pad.

Third, these substances were, although not natural hormones, hormone-like in their actions, and were thus considered by some scientists as somehow less likely to cause mischief than "drugs." (The fact that even true hormones could be catastrophic in their effects, as in hyperthyroidism or the conditions associated with hyperfunction of the adrenal glands, seems to have been overlooked in this argument.)

Fourth, the Pill quickly became big business, so that drug manufacturers began to manipulate professional opinion at an early date, stressing the wonders of the Pill and minimizing its dangers. In this they were aided by medical journalists, who for a long time—with a few exceptions—filed "gee-whiz" stories that tended to condition lay readers to a positive orientation toward oral contraceptives.

Finally, the serious side effects of the Pill have been difficult to pin down in conclusive fashion. The various clotting disorders that have been reported are all conditions that occur with a frequency that is not sufficiently high to be detected with certainty by anything short of carefully planned studies. Furthermore, the voluntary reporting of pulmonary emboli, strokes, etc. has been generally so fragmentary as to make a travesty of several "expert committee" reports prepared for the Food and Drug Administration or the World Health Organization. The possibility of drug-induced cancer of the breast or reproductive system is still in scientific limbo, since the lag time between initiation of chemical insult and the appearance of clinical cancer (if it ever occurs) can be expected to be long.

Those who have been struggling for years to alert the public and the profession to the potential mischief inherent in the prolonged use of these powerful chemicals that affect almost every cell in the body have thus had to combat a host of forces arguing against their point of view. These include the women whose sex lives have been revolutionized by the Pill, the population control experts who sincerely believe that the population explosion is a far greater danger than any harm inherent in oral contraceptives, the pharmaceutical firms that have a substantial financial stake in the Pill's image, and the doctors who have been telling their patients for years that the Pill was "as safe as water."

Obfuscating the entire picture has been a series of Alice-in-Wonderland rationalizations that smack of science but are really so unscientific as to constitute an insult to the intelligent person. The risks of death are contrasted with the risks of pregnancy as if, a) no alternative, safe and effective methods