

these and other findings, some physicians contend that the hazards of hormonal contraceptives in family planning outweigh the advantages. They argue that a woman who wants to space her children could better protect her health by using some other form of contraception, such as a diaphragm or intrauterine device (IUD).

How safe, then are birth control drugs? In order to find out, a government medical-research group—the Advisory Committee on Obstetrics and Gynecology of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration—undertook a major study in 1968. Last September, the FDA released its findings in a 200-page document titled the *Second Report on Oral Contraceptives*. The report provided new, definitive evidence of a health risk associated with Pill-taking. However, the committee concluded that: "When these potential hazards and the value of the drugs are balanced, the ratio of benefit to risk (is) sufficiently high to justify the designation safe. . . ."

However, it was a qualified statement. "No drug that is potent or effective can be absolutely safe," declares Dr. Louis M. Hellman, committee chairman and professor of obstetrics and gynecology at New York's Downstate Medical Center.

Despite the designation "safe," data contained in the report confirmed that a cause-and-effect relationship does exist between oral contraceptives and fatalities from thromboembolism. This data showed that the risk from blood-clotting disorders is 4.4 times greater for Pill-users than for nonusers. (In comparable British studies, the risk was found to be seven to ten times greater for Pill-users than for non-Pill-users.; Nevertheless, the report showed that the mortality rate of women on the Pill, who suffered from this blood-clotting disorder, was low—about three per 100,000 cases. Further, it was determined that prolonged use of the Pill does not increase the risk, and the risk disappears once the Pill is discontinued.

Moreover, the subcommittee looking into thromboembolism found a somewhat higher degree of risk for users of *sequential* birth control pills than for users of *combination* pills. Each pill of the combination type (there are twenty products of both types on the market) contains two synthetic chemical hormones: estrogen and progestogen. The primary effect of these hormones is the inhibition of ovulation. Combination drugs, the more popular of the two types of pills, are taken once a day for 20 or 21 days, beginning the fifth day after the onset of menstruation. The regimen is different with sequential pills. Sequential pills containing only estrogen are taken for the first fifteen or sixteen days, then progestogen for the next five days. Some scientists believe that the higher levels of estrogen during the earlier phase accounts for the greater hazard of the sequentials.

Some gynecologists feel that birth control pills should not be prescribed for women who are able to use some other form of contraception. Such side effects as skin and hair changes, weight gain and fluid-retention have been noted.

"We have known for several years that oral contraceptives are not without danger," Dr. Alan F. Guttmacher, president of the Planned Parenthood Federation, says. "However, the degree of danger is relatively slight, as the FDA report makes clear, and we are still going to prescribe the Pill in more or less unrestrained fashion." Dr. Guttmacher added that the Pill has special application for women who lack motivation to use other contraceptive devices.

Meanwhile, additional evidence that Pill-takers should proceed with caution continues to increase. At Stanford University Medical Center in California, researchers say they have found a link between contraceptive pills and high blood pressure. At the University of Buenos Aires, scientists reportedly have discovered liver-cell changes in women who had taken the Pill for more than a year.

Then there are those authorities who maintain that the report is too "hard" or too "soft" on the Pill-health question. One pharmaceutical manufacturer, for example, G. D. Searle & Co., a major supplier of birth control pills, has reservations that Pill-taking and thromboembolisms are connected.