

Dr. Ley termed the benefits "significant." He didn't say for whom. He might, for example, get an argument from those women—or their survivors—who got a disabling or fatal blood clotting disease and who would not have taken the pill had they been warned by their physicians or, for that matter, by the FDA, about these and numerous other hazards.

Many private patients and most clinic patients are not told about the hazards." In the preface to "The Doctors' Case Against the Pill," a new book by science writer Barbara Seaman, this cultivated ignorance is characterized as "a public scandal" by Dr. Hugh J. Davis, director of the Contraceptive Clinic of Johns Hopkins Hospital.

As to "medical supervision" of women on the pill, that indeed has its uses. But it is irrelevant to the question whether the pill does, or does not, cause cancer.

In a 200-page report last month, the FDA's advisory committee said there is much data suggesting indirectly that steroid hormones such as those used in the pill, particularly estrogen, "may be carcinogenic"—cancer causing—in humans. The report went on to say:

"These data are derived from experiments on laboratory animals in which long-term administration of estrogen resulted in cancer in five species. Although all physical and chemical agents that are carcinogenic in man produce malignant tumors in experimental animals also, evidence of the carcinogenicity of estrogen in other species cannot be transposed directly to man.

"Suspicion lingers, however, that the results in laboratory animals may be pertinent to man."

Surely this conclusion is as troubling for a healthy woman on the pill who could reliably use another form of contraception as the discovery of cancer in the organ of rats given artificial sweeteners is for a healthy woman who could drink a beverage sweetened with sugar instead of one sweetened with a cyclamate.

And certainly the advisory committee was deeply troubled, because its very first recommendation to the FDA said that whether oral contraceptives induce cancer in women "is the major unsolved question . . . funds to investigate this relation are urgently needed."

Most of the advisory committee's report is a catalogue of cause-effect relationships with the pill that have been established, such as blood clotting, hair loss, skin blotching and liver disease, or those that have not been established or disproved but are suspected as possibilities. In this category are not only cancer but also the effects on the offspring of users and on every organ system of the body.

Yet at a press conference in which the report was released, Dr. Ley was able to pronounce it "favorable." That, of course, was a legal judgment.

When Finch met with reporters about the cyclamates, the subject of the pill was raised, to the amazement of almost everyone, by Dr. Robert O. Egeberg. The assistant secretary of HEW for health and scientific affairs, he was affectionately introduced by Finch as "the nation's top health officer, the world's most reasonable man," and the speaker who would "put things in perspective."

Dr. Egeberg's perspective proved to be one that would make many a scientist shudder. For one thing, he said that the synthetic sweeteners "have probably saved and prolonged a tremendous number of lives the last few years by helping people keep their weight down. . . ."

There is no medical evidence that the cyclamates have saved lives. It turned out that there isn't even significant medical evidence that they help people keep their weight down. Dr. Egeberg finally conceded that his claim was based on nothing more than personal experience in losing 30 to 40 pounds after giving up cigarettes. In short, his claim was a testimonial.

Bringing his perspective to the pill, Dr. Egeberg said that it has "drawbacks . . . but if you think of the number of young girls who are killed each year or were killed through aseptic abortion, you have something to balance there, too."

Dr. Egeberg's approach is one that views women as a monolith, which they are not. There is nothing in his "perspective" for the woman, say, whose concern is merely with postponing her family, not with avoiding an abortion. Besides, fatal blood clotting on the pill kills about as many as die from criminal abortions.