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THE PILL:—PRESS AND PUBLIC AT THE EXPERTS' MERCY

EDITORS' NOTE: This article, which will be presented in two parts in the winter and spring issues, is unusual for the *Review* in that it does not focus entirely on journalism. Rather, it is a case study—and a highly important one, in the editors' opinion—of the insufficiency of the mechanisms now available for monitoring specialist institutions and individuals on the public's behalf. The author, Morton Mintz, has been reporting on The Pill for The Washington Post since late 1965. Mintz won numerous awards for his reporting in 1962 in the Post about the baby-deforming drug thalidomide. He wrote "The Therapeutic Nightmare," revised and reissued as "By Prescription Only."

The only way that democracy can be made bearable is by developing and cherishing a class of men sufficiently honest and disinterested to challenge the prevailing quacks. No such class has ever appeared in the United States. Thus, the business of harassing the quacks devolves upon the newspapers. When they fail in their duty, which is usually, we are at the quacks' mercy.

—H. L. Mencken in *Minority Report*

(By Morton Mintz)

Twenty days a month, the Population Council estimated in 1967, 6.5 million women in the United States and 6.3 million elsewhere swallow a birth control pill. The women are healthy, not sick, and the pills are powerful chemicals. This is a situation "unique in the history of human therapeutics," the Food and Drug Administration's Advisory Committee on Obstetrics and Gynecology said in a report in 1966. "Never will so many people have taken such potent drugs voluntarily over such a protracted period for an objective other than the control of disease." This massive experiment in drug-taking was founded, of course, on a presumption of safety which now has omnipresent manifestations. In *Sex and the Office*, in a chapter on how to manage an affair during the lunch-hour, for example, Helen Gurley Brown counsels, "If you use pills, so much the easier." Jeanine Deckers, the former Singing Nun, composes "La Pilule d'Or" ("The Golden Pill"). "In her fresh, warm voice," *McCall's* said in May, 1967, "she was singing a hymn of praise to God for inspiring mankind to invent the birth-control pill." And 20th Century-Fox produces *Prudence and the Pill*, which Renata Adler, in *The New York Times*, described as "a nauseating little sex comedy in which somebody is always substituting a vitamin or an aspirin for somebody else's oral contraceptive until everyone gets confused or pregnant."

Such cultural stigmata show that the presumption of safety is pervasive, not that it is valid. They also illuminate the extreme degree of trust put in experts without whose advocacy the oral contraceptives, which are prescription drugs, would not legally have been made freely available to American women.

"Experts . . . at any point in time are frequently considered to be those who espouse the most popular and widely held views of the predominant orthodoxy," Paul Talakay wrote in 1964 in *Drugs in Our Society*. "The history of medicine abounds with examples of the perpetuation of totally illogical treatments . . . because of the powerful influence of an authoritarian orthodoxy. . . . The opinion of experts should be subject to challenge by way of a wide variety of media and channels."

A severe challenge to the presumption of safety of oral contraceptives was laid down on April 27, 1968, in a report in the *British Medical Journal*. The FDA responded immediately by summoning the American manufacturers to meet with it a few days later, on May 8, in Washington. The upshot was that the producers agreed to a major revision of the uniform labeling, the FDA-au-