

May 10, 2010

To: Interested Students of the Family

Re: **The Pill: Did it Cause the Sexual Revolution 50 Years Ago This Month?**

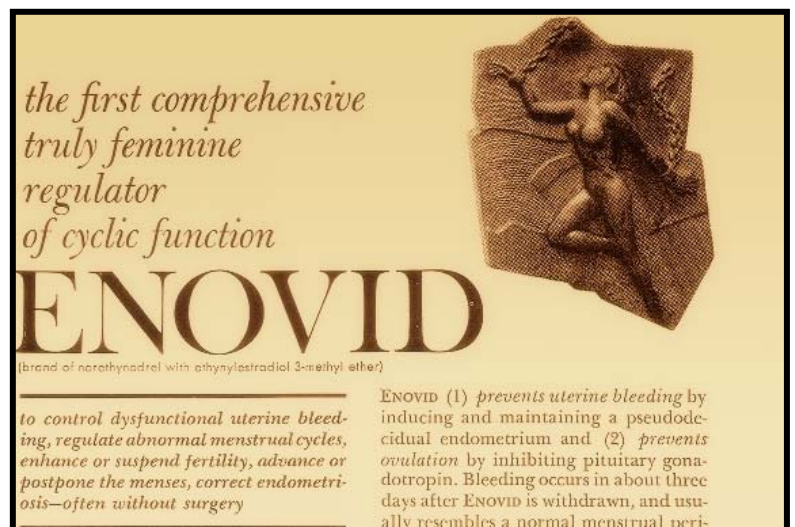
No student of the family can ignore this remarkable milestone: Mother's Day marked the 50th anniversary of the FDA's approval of a tiny tablet that dramatically changed the face of the family and culture.

This little pill – the first medicine ever designed to be taken by the healthy - chemically altered a woman's hormonal cycle, preventing ovulation and thus, pregnancy.

What made this new development so remarkable was that it was, for the first time, contraception...

- Wholly controlled by the woman
- Remarkably easy to use and inexpensive
- A genuine and therefore “respectable” medical product
- Taken separate from the sexual act
- Was relatively safe and highly effective
- Paralleled already changing attitudes about sexuality and the roles of women

G.D. Searle applied for approval of their new product (Enovid) in 1959 and soon announced the Pill in this advertisement in *Obstetrics & Gynecology*.



*the first comprehensive
truly feminine
regulator
of cyclic function*

ENOVID

(brand of norethynodrel with ethynylestradiol 3-methyl ether)

to control dysfunctional uterine bleeding, regulate abnormal menstrual cycles, enhance or suspend fertility, advance or postpone the menses, correct endometriosis—often without surgery

ENOVID (1) prevents uterine bleeding by inducing and maintaining a pseudodecidual endometrium and (2) prevents ovulation by inhibiting pituitary gonadotropin. Bleeding occurs in about three days after ENOVID is withdrawn, and usually resembles a normal menstrual period.

The image in this first advertisement was prescient; depicting the mythological Andromeda breaking free from her shackles, for this is what the new pill was to accomplish. Ironically, the name *Andromeda* literally communicates “to be considerate or mindful of the man.” This is a profoundly important point as we consider the long-term impact of the pill upon women, the family and culture.

What the Pill Did and Didn't Do...

Didn't Start the Sexual Revolution

There are compelling reasons why the Pill did not start the sexual revolution. First, there is no single event - not the Pill, the advent of pornography, taking prayer out of schools, etc. – that started the sexual revolution. In fact, historians refer to the American Sixties as the “the second sexual revolution” because there was quite a robust sexual revolution that took place in the 1910-20s, personified in the iconic Flapper as well as bold epidemics of sexually transmitted diseases and pornography.¹

A strong case can be made that cultural affluence, materialism and increasing secularism over both the 1910-20s and 1960s-to-present fueled the loosening of our sexual values. Consider also that the Pill has been available in most parts of the world for decades and some (i.e. Saudi Arabia, India) have not experienced sexual revolutions like ours. This revolution in sexuality was the result of many important factors converging, of which the emergence of the Pill was certainly key.



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Did Contribute to the Second Sexual Revolution

Even though the Pill was not available to unmarried women until the late 1960s and early 70s - many clinics required young single women to provide a note from their minister attesting to an impending wedding date - there are few who would contend it didn't play a significant role in fueling these changes. (More on this in the "Iron Curtain" section below)

Only Fine-Tuned Control of Family Size

The Pill did allow women to control the number and spacing of their children, but women knew how to do this for quite some time. In 1800, the average American woman had eight or more children. By 1850, the average was 7 births per woman, shrinking to 3.5 by 1900.² While the Pill did allow women greater control of their fertility, it is just not true that wives were mere "baby-making machines" held captive to run-away fertility prior to the Pill. Women being smart, long knew how their fertility worked and how to manage it.

Became a Virtual Iron Curtain Between Sex and Babies

Even though women long knew how to limit their fertility, the Pill made (along with corresponding legal and cultural developments) the separation between sexuality and the possibility of babies nearly an inalienable right. The fact that a woman could be sexually active and virtually guaranteed (by medical science no less!) of *not* becoming pregnant had the effect of making her feel cheated when an unexpected pregnancy did happen. Writing recently on the impact of the Pill, Al Mohler says the "severing of this relationship [between sex and childbearing] represents a quantum change in human life and relationships, not to mention morality."³

Increased Abortion

This "iron curtain" between sex and the possibility of babies had the unintended consequence of dramatically boosting the rate of abortion, which spiked dramatically around 1968-70, well before 1973's *Roe v Wade*. This was because of the growing sense of having a "right not to be pregnant" if a sexually active woman didn't want to be. She could also face pressure toward abortion from her partner who didn't want *his* sexual partner hampered by pregnancy. The Pill was expected to actually reduce abortion by reducing unwanted pregnancies.

Killed Shot-gun Weddings

Nobel prize-winning economist George Akerlof explained in a celebrated essay how increases in the use of the Pill and abortion contributed to the near extinction of the "shot-gun wedding" which were never about *forcing* people to get married. They were about "doing right by the woman," an action of respect and honor toward her and her family. They formed a great many good, healthy, happy families. However, the Pill effectively let men off the hook, forcing the woman to alone deal with that which was never supposed to happen and was now her primary responsibility to prevent.⁴

Decreased Age of Sexual Debut / Increase in Delay of Marriage

Studies show the Pill contributed to a strong more delay in marriage as well as a lowering in the age of sexual debut. This is because the security that marriage provided – both in the terms of moral reputation (due to shifting cultural *mores*) and accidental pregnancy – no longer seemed as necessary.⁵

Burdens Women

Generally, the Pill is seen as a benefit to women, allowing them to better time their fertility to correspond with attaining a college education and early career establishment uninterrupted by surprise pregnancy. And this also made it more likely for employers to invest time and training in young women for higher level careers. Women have gained from this.

But it has hurt women deeply as well. Professor Bruce Wydick, an economist at the University of San Francisco, specializing in family relationships, explains that because of the different ways men and women are wired and



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therefore value sexuality, “a world where social norms dictate that sex and commitment go together is a world that upholds the happiness and dignity of women.”

And as such, Wydick contends, “the revolution that brought sexual freedom allowed women to unwittingly undercut each other in the competition for men, providing men greater access to more sex for lower and lower levels of commitment, to the obvious benefit of the men.” Women thus became weaker players in the sexual market place and men became stronger.

He concludes, “Women’s sexual freedom became the greatest thing that ever happened to men who wanted as much sex as possible with as little commitment as possible, and hence made women much worse off.” Thus, he calls the embrace of this freedom by the woman’s movement “a mistake of incalculable magnitude” for woman.⁶

Wydick is not alone in this conclusion. A 2009 study conducted by the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania finds that “women’s happiness has fallen both absolutely and relative to men’s...through much of the industrialized world” over the past 35 years, even as women’s social gains have increased.

Of course, the *why?* for this cannot be known conclusively, but the authors do conclude their study with this summary:

Finally, the changes brought through the women’s movement may have decreased women’s happiness...[as] men [possibly] garner a disproportionate share of the benefits of the women’s movement.⁷

Conclusion

The arrival of the Pill was supposed to have Andromeda unleashed from her chains, as its proponents told she would be. But maybe the proper analogy is not woman becoming unfettered from the chains of her biology, but rather her trading the God-given power of her femininity for the lie of thinking she will find happiness if she approaches sexuality more like a man.

Young women today should re-consider if such a trade was really in their best interest as women and take bold action relative to that conclusion.

After all, does a woman really become strong and liberated by submitting herself to the rules of the male sexual market?

The experience of the last 40 years or so can give women guidance for the future.

Notes

¹ See Glenn T. Stanton, *Why Marriage Matters*, (Pinion Press, 1997), pp. 34-39.

² Susan E. Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Woman, Fertility and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820*, (U. of N.C. Press, 2009).

³ Albert Mohler, “The Pill Turns 50 – TIME Considers the Contraceptive Revolution,” April 26, 2010. AlbertMohler.com.

⁴ George A. Akerlof, “An Analysis of Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing in the United States,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 151 (1996): 277-317.

⁵ Claudia Goldin and Lawrence F. Katz, “The Power of the Pill: Oral Contraceptives and Women’s Career and Marriage Decisions,” *Journal of Political Economy*, 110 (2002): 730-770.

⁶ Personal correspondence between the author and Bruce Wydick, May 10, 2010.

⁷ Betsy Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, “The Paradox of Declining Female Happiness,” *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, August 2009: 190-224. See pages 194 and 223 for last quotes.