

Family planning in the seventies

Report of a study day held at College Headquarters

A ONE-DAY course on the subject of *Family Planning in the Seventies* was held at the College on 9 February, 1972 under the auspices of the College and the Family Planning Association.

Dr G. I. Watson

The chair for the morning session was taken by the President, Dr G. I. Watson, who proposed a slogan for the seventies, "The right baby in the right place at the right time". He pointed out the importance of the subject by referring to the dilemma of medicine which was devoting increasing resources to severely handicapped babies whilst at the same time arranging for the termination of pregnancies which could often be expected to produce normal ones.

Mr Caspar Brook

Mr Caspar Brook, Director of the Family Planning Association, presented figures to show that far from every child being a wanted child, approximately 300,000 conceptions per annum in our advanced society were unwanted at the time.

He discussed the possibility of social constraint on large families in the interest of stabilising the population but rejected this solution in favour of free family planning services. He suggested that the possibility of freeing the 'pill' from prescription should be scientifically investigated to see if the use of medical time in monitoring its ill effects was time well spent. Contraception should be taught as part of sex education. The government should have a population policy and this would gradually change social attitudes to modifying population increase.

He questioned the predominance of doctors in family planning services arguing that if laymen were more involved there might be social benefits through publicity and marketing of contraceptives in which doctors may not wish to take a direct part, but which could have the desirable social effects. Abortion must be recognised as a 'last resort' form of family planning—it was not advocated by his association.

In commenting on Mr Brook's address, the President stated that the College was not in a position to pronounce on family planning policy and that one effect of freeing the 'pill' from prescription would be to undermine the basis of one of the most important investigations in the world into the long-term effects of the 'pill.'

Dr Donald Grant

Dr Donald Grant maintained that family planning is a basic function of family doctoring; although most general practitioners are not involved as specialists, it was the general practitioner's prerogative to be involved with family planning advice and he must therefore be trained.

At the undergraduate level, training was encouraged by including a question on the subject in examination papers. Postgraduate training courses were very necessary. If general practitioners became accustomed to thinking of their patients' problems in physical, psychological and social terms and developed some 'mechanistic' expertise, they would develop sensitivity to the hidden requests behind the patients' questions and

could become aware of the hidden *needs* of their patients which lay beneath their overt requests for advice.

He concluded by putting over the message that the younger generation are working out their own ways of relating to others in society and that as doctors we have no right to criticise their behaviour merely because it is different from ours or the way we would wish to behave.

Dr Elizabeth Wilson

Dr Elizabeth Wilson spoke about the involvement of the Family Planning Association in supplying contraceptive advice. The oral contraceptive and sterilization were the only 100 per cent effective methods of contraception and therefore medical involvement was inevitable. The image of the Family Planning Association had risen in recent years due in part to the eminent gynaecologists who had been presidents of the Association.

The Family Planning Association provide all services for family planning where general practitioners abstain from giving advice; they also were able to advise youngsters who might be unwilling to go to their own doctor because they identified him as a 'parent'.

They are able to help general practitioners by providing technical services and in some areas were able to counsel on psychosexual problems.

The Family Planning Association are also providing domiciliary services in some areas including Glasgow where they had excellent liaison with the general practitioners often via their attached health visitors.

The Family Planning Association were also expanding their training facilities both for their own staff and for general practitioners who wished to undertake to provide services and advice. Dr Wilson concluded by referring to the need for much more research both on methods and on attitudes of doctors and patients.

Discussion

During discussion it was pointed out that psychosexual problems may often be helped by satisfactory planning advice since fear of pregnancy frequently predisposes to sexual difficulties. The slogan "Every husband, a wanted husband" was suggested. The issue of confidentiality was raised. With increasing pregnancies under the age of 16 the problem is going to become more difficult.

Professor S. G. Clayton

The chair in the afternoon was taken by Professor S. G. Clayton, Vice-president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and talks and discussions centred on the medical aspects of contraception.

Complications

Dr John McEwan spoke of the need for medical assessment of women taking oral contraceptives and recommended reviewing all patients after three months in the first year and thence every six months. Raised blood pressure when it occurred was not treatable except by withdrawal of the contraceptive. Depression and weight increase were the other major difficulties.

Dr Thomas White gave an historical account of intra-uterine contraception and advocated wider use of this method which was second only to the 'pill' as an effective, reversible method. He maintained that complications when they occur were rarely troublesome.

Dr Barbara Law spoke on sterilization as a method of family limitation. Vasectomy was becoming increasingly popular. It was simple and quick but required skill and it

should not be lightly undertaken without adequate training. What was much more difficult and time consuming was to assess a couple requesting vasectomy. This required great care and patient enquiry into the motives behind their request. Nevertheless it was likely to be increasingly used as a method in the western world.

The President, in summing up the day's discussions, said that it is important to teach attitudes as well as techniques. Like tuberculosis in the past which was sometimes discovered by general practitioners, sometimes by hospital doctors, and sometimes by a local authority clinic, it does not really matter who supplies the family planning information and counselling. What matters is that this should be freely available to all.

D. J. Price

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