

## *The "pill". Why not?*

M. CURWEN, M.B., B.S., M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., M.R.C.G.P.

Margate

ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES HAVE NOW BEEN in general use for several years and most married women in the country are well aware of their existence. From the time of their introduction there has always been a certain amount of adverse publicity concerning their undesirable side effects and especially about those cases where death is thought to have been the result of taking the 'pill'. At the time of this study the report of the Committee on Safety of Drugs, which recommended the withdrawal of high oestrogen-containing tablets, had not been published but there was no evidence in my own practice that this had much effect on the number of women using oral contraceptives.

In September 1969 only about 25 per cent of the married women of child-bearing age on my NHS list were taking the 'pill'. Most of the patients are in the skilled and semi-skilled working class, with a few at each end of the social scale. There are no unusual religious groupings. Since the 'pill' is the most reliable and the most convenient of all methods of contraception, I thought it surprising that this number was not much larger and decided to circularize a sample of those patients who were in the appropriate age group and who were not, as far as I was aware, taking an oral contraceptive.

The following questionnaire was sent to 100 married women below the age of 46 selected in alphabetical order from the practice list and excluding those known to be on the 'pill'.

1. Are you at present taking an oral contraceptive (the "pill")? .. . . . . . Yes/No
2. If the answer to Question 1 is "no", do you intend to start taking it in the near future (i.e., within the next few weeks or after the end of a current pregnancy)? .. . . . . . Yes/No
3. If the answer to Question 2 is "no", is this because:

*(Mark with a tick where appropriate)*

- (a) you think that you do not need contraceptives because:
  - (i) you are past child-bearing age? .. . . . . .
  - (ii) you know that pregnancy is impossible for reasons connected with your own or your husband's health? .. . . . . .
  - (iii) you are not having marital relationships? .. . . . . .
  - (iv) you do not mind if you become pregnant? .. . . . . .
- (b) you have religious objections to artificial methods of birth control? .. . . . . .
- (c) you are satisfied with your present method of birth control? .. . . . . .
- (d) you are not satisfied with your present method of birth control but cannot take the "pill" because:
  - (i) you are frightened that it may make you ill? .. . . . . .
  - (ii) your husband will not let you take it in case it makes you ill? .. . . . . .
  - (iii) it is too expensive? .. . . . . .
  - (iv) you have been advised not to take it for medical reasons? .. . . . . .
- (e) some other reason (specify) .. . . . . .

An accompanying letter explained the nature of the study and gave assurances as to the complete anonymity of the replies. A stamped, addressed envelope was enclosed. Despite these precautions, only 61 forms were returned. This was disappointing considering that all were patients of a single-handed practice who might have been expected to have had complete confidence in the doctor. These reduced numbers affect the significance of the results; so also does the omission, not appreciated at the time, of a question asking those who were satisfied with their present method of birth control whether they would otherwise have wished to take the 'pill'. Nevertheless, it is thought that the results are worth publishing as they might act

as a pilot trial for a more extensive study elsewhere.

### Results

Three patients stated that they were already taking the 'pill' (presumably prescribed by the Family Planning Clinic), and two more that they were about to do so. Hysterectomy had been carried out in two patients and one other was having no marital relationships. One had to be excluded because the answers on the form were mutually contradictory and the other because the only reason, given under section (e), was vague.

The remaining 51 patients gave the following reasons for not using an oral contraceptive.

Not trying to avoid pregnancy	7
Religious objections	1
Satisfied with present methods	29
Frightened it would make her ill	25
Husband frightened it would make wife ill	8
Too expensive	0
Advised not to take oral contraceptive for medical reasons	3

These add up to more than 51 because a number of patients gave more than one reason.

Certain interesting conclusions can be drawn from what is admittedly a small and imperfectly designed study. It has to be assumed that those who did not reply are distinguished only from those who did so by lack of interest, a distrust of the anonymity of the study or mere laziness. Within these limitations the figures point to the following facts:

1. About 90 per cent of married women are trying to avoid pregnancy at any one time (25 per cent on the "pill" and 85 per cent of the remaining 75 per cent).
2. In an area without a large Roman Catholic population, religious objections are surprisingly rare.
3. More than half of those who do not take the "pill" (representing 40 per cent of all married women of child-bearing age), would be frightened to do so whether or not they are satisfied with their present method. Sometimes their husbands are equally or more worried about its effect. This figure might now be larger as a result of subsequent adverse publicity and it reflects the enormous influence of the press in discouraging the use of what many doctors feel to be a most satisfactory and a reasonably safe method of contraception.
4. The cost of oral contraception worries nobody in the affluent society.

## THERAPEUTIC TRIAL

### *A comparative study of two long-acting antihistamines*

B. MADDISON, M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., M.R.C.G.P.

R. D. CLEMENTS, M.B., B.S., M.R.C.G.P.

G. C. RIVETT, M.A., B.M., B.Ch., D.Obst.R.C.O.G., M.R.C.G.P.

R. R. ROBERTS, B.Sc., M.B., B.S., D.C.H.

E. J. HOLLAND, M.B., B.S., D.Obst.R.C.O.G.

and

F. A. DOUSE, M.B., B.S., D.Obst.R.C.O.G.

Bletchley

IN A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF the effectiveness of two formulations of pheniramine it was suggested on the basis of a short retrospective comparison that this drug was preferred to chlorpheniramine maleate B.P. It was decided to investigate this finding further in a prospective manner as the fallibility of retrospective studies is well known. A study was therefore planned