

## The Birth Control Pill is 60 Years Old!

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Imagine our country without the birth control pill. What would the workforce look like? What direction might the abortion debate have taken? Would we have had a woman run for President? The “Pill” has enabled many societal changes: surveys show nearly 80% of college students are sexually active<sup>1</sup>, the average birth rate in the United States is 1.86 children per woman (half of what it was in 1960<sup>2</sup>), and the average age of first time mothers continues to rise<sup>3</sup>.

The 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth control pill marks an occasion to explore the effects of the Pill on our society<sup>4</sup>. Oral contraception is not only one of the most profound medical advances of the last century, it is also the foundation on which a major cultural and social transformation have been built. The sexual revolution, the movement of women into the workforce, the paradigm shift in the arena of women’s health, and the landmark *Roe v. Wade* ruling legalizing abortion in this country can all be linked back to that tiny pill called Enovid. Enovid was a medication originally approved as a treatment for menstrual problems, but ended up launching a revolution. Helping millions of women avoid unplanned pregnancies, oral contraception has clearly separated sexual intercourse from childbearing.

In 1957, when the FDA approved the use of the Pill for menstrual disorders, a large number of women suddenly reported severe menstrual disorders to their physicians<sup>4</sup>. In 1960, the Pill was approved for contraceptive use. By 1965, 6.5 million American women were on the Pill, making it the most utilized form of birth control in the United States<sup>4</sup>.

The approval of Enovid, the first birth control pill, gave women complete control over their reproductive rights for the first time. Enovid provided women with a reliable, relatively cheap contraceptive that could be administered privately, free of social stigma and without anyone else’s knowledge. In many ways, the Pill fueled the modern feminist movement, and it highlighted the first of many amazing parallels between medical advances and feminism. For example, amniocentesis and chorionic villus sampling further shifted cultural perception in favor of childbearing later in life. For the first time, women could discover whether their fetus had a chromosomal abnormality associated with advanced maternal age. This enabled them to delay childbearing yet also have greater certainty regarding the outcome of their pregnancies<sup>5</sup>. Even newer techniques have allowed contemporary medicine to

now analyze fetal DNA from maternal blood stream as early as the first trimester<sup>6</sup>.

The growth of assisted reproductive techniques (ARTs) such as sperm donation, artificial insemination, and in-vitro fertilization pushed the envelope of reproductive choice even further, enabling women to carry biological children without sexual intercourse. With the help of donor sperm, a woman can now choose to have a child biologically related to her<sup>7</sup>. ARTs changed the paradigm of the “older mother.” Fertility preservation provided women with more opportunities to postpone childbearing without limiting their ability to give birth to their own genetic children<sup>8</sup>. With the help of donor eggs, women with premature ovarian failure and postmenopausal women can give birth<sup>9</sup>. ARTs brought the issues of cloning, stem cell research and embryonic selection to the forefront of scientific, social and religious debate, the scope of which is beyond this editorial.

The ability of women to postpone childbearing and focus on their career first led to major changes. For instance, it allowed for more women to enter the medical profession. Up until the 1970s, less than 10% of practicing obstetrician-gynecologists were women<sup>10</sup>. In 2014, over 80% of OB/GYN residents were women<sup>11</sup>. The feminization of women’s healthcare has encouraged more research on diseases affecting women such as reproductive cancers, osteoporosis, and menopause. The results of these studies, including the Nurses’ Health Study and the Women’s Health Initiative, have transformed our understanding of women’s health and the development of medications and therapies in woman’s health. The explosion of women’s interest in their health has led to a concomitant barrage of books, magazines, web sites, and other media devoted solely to this topic.

As women became more educated about their bodies and their health, they grew more assertive in their healthcare. With the publication of the eponymous tome *Our Bodies, Ourselves* in 1973, women became more comfortable advocating for their healthcare<sup>12</sup>. Women felt more empowered; they held gatherings to learn about their sexual organs and about pleasure in sexual intercourse, created the natural childbirth movement, and demanded funding and research of female cancers. Furthermore, they disseminated knowledge of reproductive rights through political rallies, women’s health clinics, and writings.

Many women consider access to safe, affordable, legal, and reliable birth control as the best thing that ever happened to them, giving them clearer skin, more comfortable periods, a reduced risk for ovarian and endometrial cancer, and the freedom of family planning<sup>13</sup>. "All this from one tiny Pill - Happy 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday!"

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