

TIME

The Pill at 50: Sex, Freedom and Paradox

In May 1960, the FDA approved a new oral contraceptive. Somehow we are still fighting about it half a century later — whom it helped, whom it hurt, what it meant and why it mattered

By Nancy Gibbs Thursday, Apr. 22, 2010

http://content.time.com/time/video/player/0,32068,79545976001_1983742,00.html (video)

In 1999 the *Economist* named the Pill the most important scientific advance of the 20th century, but it has a strange and complex history.

Today more than 100 million women around the world start their day with this tiny tablet. So small. So powerful. But in surprising ways, so misunderstood.

Consider the contradictions: It was the first medicine ever designed to be taken regularly by people who were not sick. Its main inventor was a conservative Catholic who was looking for a treatment for infertility and instead found a guarantee of it. It was blamed for unleashing the sexual revolution among suddenly swinging singles, despite the fact that throughout the 1960s, women usually had to be married to get it. Its supporters hoped it would strengthen marriage by easing the strain of unwanted children; its critics still charge that the Pill gave rise to promiscuity, adultery and the breakdown of the family.

In 1960 the typical American woman had 3.6 children; by 1980 the number had dropped below 2. For the first time, more women identified themselves as workers than as homemakers. "There is a straight line between the Pill and the changes in family structure we now see," says National Organization for Women (NOW) president Terry O'Neill, "with 22% of women earning more than their husbands. In 1970, 70% of women with children under 6 were at home; 30% worked. Now that's roughly reversed."

Improvising Infertility

As long as people have been making little people, they've wanted to know how not to. The ancient Egyptians mixed a paste out of crocodile dung and formed it into a pessary, or vaginal insert. Aristotle proposed cedar oil and frankincense oil as spermicides; Casanova wrote of using half a lemon as a cervical cap. The condom is often credited to one Dr. Condom in the mid-1700s, who was said to have invented a sheath made out of sheep intestines for England's King Charles II to help limit the number of bastards he sired, though such devices had actually been around for centuries.

"The Pill was not at all what separated reproduction and sex among married people," argues Harvard economist Claudia Goldin, who calls that "among the biggest misconceptions" about sexual behavior and the Pill. Long before its introduction, women already knew how to avoid pregnancy, however imperfectly. The typical white American woman in 1800 gave birth seven times; by 1900 the average was down to 3.5.

But well into the modern age, contraception met with unified opposition from across the religious spectrum, Protestants and Catholics, Western and Eastern Orthodox. Sex, even within marriage, was immoral unless aimed at having a baby.

In 1873 Congress passed a law banning birth control information as obscene. So women seeking ways to limit the number of children they bore had to know how to read the papers. Through the turn of the century, advertisements for potions to treat "female disorders" or menstrual irregularities carried a bold, bright warning: "Portuguese Female Pills, not to be used during pregnancy for they will cause miscarriage."

The Mothers of the Pill

The driving force to change all this was a woman born in Corning, N.Y., in 1879 to a Catholic mother and a father – Margaret Sanger. When her mother died at the age of 50 after 18 pregnancies, she confronted her father over her mother's coffin and charged, "You caused this. Mother is dead from having too many children."

Margaret Sanger went on to train as a nurse and as early as 1912 was dreaming of a "magic pill" that would prevent pregnancy. She coined the phrase *birth control* in 1914, the year she was arrested for mailing her magazine the *Woman Rebel*, an outlaw tract with its discussions of contraceptive use. She opened the nation's first family-planning clinic in a squalid tenement section of Brooklyn. Arrested again, she served 30 days. But she did not stop.

In 1917, Sanger met a woman named Katharine Dexter McCormick at a lecture in Boston. Born into money, McCormick was the second woman to graduate from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, with a degree in biology. McCormick, like Sanger an ardent feminist, set out to help women who did not want to have children be able to prevent pregnancy without their husbands' help, or even knowledge.

In the years that followed, Sanger provided the ingenuity and energy to drive the birth control movement, and McCormick provided the capital. The movement gained momentum during the Depression, when limiting the size of families became practically a matter of survival. America went from 55 birth control clinics in 1930 to more than 800 in 1942, the year Sanger's Birth Control League changed its name to the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

Gregory Pincus, whom Sanger met at a dinner party in 1951 and whom she persuaded McCormick to bankroll, had been a promising assistant professor of physiology at Harvard.

He learned from his work with animals that injections of progesterone, which chemists in Mexico had been able to synthesize from wild yams, could block ovulation. Over the decades Pincus had followed the work of the country's pre-eminent infertility specialist, a Harvard-trained physician named John Rock. A devout Catholic, Rock had made it his mission to help barren women have babies. When Pincus and Rock began to collaborate, Rock was experimenting with using hormones to help women conceive. The idea was to use progesterone to suppress ovulation for four months, then withdraw the drug and hope for a rebound effect; several of the women in his trials did get pregnant. Using hormones to prevent pregnancy followed the same logic: the progesterone prevented the release of a fertilizable egg, thus making it impossible for a woman to conceive.

Testing the Pill as a contraceptive was illegal in the US, so in 1956 Rock and Pincus conducted clinical trials in Puerto Rico, where many women were desperate for some better means of birth control. The Pill proved effective at blocking ovulation and was approved for the treatment of "female disorders" in 1957. Thirty states still had laws against promoting birth control — so for its early life, the Pill existed only undercover.

The Catholic Conundrum

In 1962, when Pope John XXIII convened the Second Vatican Council, many lay leaders and clergy anticipated a relaxation of restraints on family planning as part of a general liberalization of church teaching. By the time his successor, Pope Paul VI, appointed a commission to study the issue two years later, roughly half of American Catholics were already practicing birth control. Leaked reports of the commission's findings suggested that nearly all its theologians and a majority of the Cardinals favored changing the church's teaching on the immorality of contraception — but the following year, Paul VI issued his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, in which he sided with the minority. The teaching against contraception stayed in place.

In any event, it was too late to reverse the trend; by 1970, two-thirds of Catholic women were using birth control, more than a quarter of those the Pill.

Social and Sexual Revolution

Meanwhile, the Pill's promoters had gained traction with a different line of argument. Some saw it playing a role in controlling runaway population growth, which in turn would reduce the risks of famine and political instability. Others hoped the Pill might help bring down abortion rates, which in countries like East Germany matched the number of live births.

Whatever the public arguments in its favor, the Pill was embraced by millions of women for a very personal reason: it provided, for the first time, an effective, convenient and nonintrusive means of avoiding pregnancy. The number of women using it climbed from roughly 400,000 in 1961 to 1.2 million a year later, then triple that in 1965.

Alarmists were inclined to see the Pill as the catalyst for harrowing change. A 1966 cover story in *U.S. News & World Report* asked, "Can its availability to all women of childbearing age lead to sexual anarchy?" There were even reports of the Pill turning up in high schools.

But just because the arrival of the Pill coincided with a liberalization of attitudes does not mean the Pill caused it. The Pill hadn't yet been invented, after all, when the Kinsey Report was published in 1953, asserting that half the women studied had had sex before marriage and 1 in 4 had committed adultery by her 40s. More important, there was no way to know: studies of contraceptive use in the 1960s focused on married women — which made sense, since the vast majority of women on the Pill were married. In some states it was illegal to prescribe it to single women; fewer than half of U.S. college health clinics offered it. Even Planned Parenthood required that patients be married to get the Pill.

Changing Roles, Changing Lives

When Dr. C. Lee Buxton, chairman of the department of obstetrics and gynecology at Yale Medical School, and Estelle Griswold, head of the Planned Parenthood League of Connecticut, opened a clinic that provided women with contraceptive information, they were promptly arrested — use of birth control was still a crime in their state — and the case attracted national attention as it advanced all the way to the Supreme Court. In 1965, in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, the Justices ruled 7-2 that the Bill of Rights implicitly included a right to privacy and overturned the bans on contraceptive use by married couples.

By that time the Pill was already the most popular form of birth control in the U.S., with 6.5 million American women using it. Many complained of side effects — dizziness, weight gain, nausea, even blood clots — which were partly alleviated by the introduction of a lower-dose Pill. But there were other concerns as well; within a few years of its introduction, powerful African-American leaders were denouncing the Pill as being aimed at "black genocide." They urged black women not to take it, arguing that a high birthrate was necessary to change the balance of power in America.

The racist argument around contraception, as well as abortion, has been around since the days of Margaret Sanger and still bring out controversy. Sanger was a leading proponent of eugenics, a belief that the human gene pool could be improved by selective breeding, and heavily promoted birth control among blacks.

By the 1970s the true impact of the Pill could begin to be measured, and it was not on the sexual behavior of American women; it was on how they envisioned their lives, their choices and their obligations. In 1970 the median age at which college graduates married was about 23; by 1975, as use of the Pill among single women became more common, that age had jumped 2.5 years. The fashion for large families went the way of the girdle. In 1963, 80% of non-Catholic college women said they wanted three or more children; that plunged to 29% by 1973. More women were able to imagine a life that included both a family and a job, which changed their childbearing calculations. As an Indiana teacher, 23, told TIME in 1967, "When I got married I was still in college, and I wanted to be certain that I finished. Now we want to buy a home, and it's going to be possible a lot sooner if I teach. With the Pill I know I can keep earning money and not worry about an accident that would ruin everything."

Employers, meanwhile, lost a primary excuse for closing their ranks to women. It helped that as more women were knocking on the doors, more companies were eager to open them; by 1966,

unemployment was around 3.8%. Federal manpower expert Howard Stambler said, "There are almost no men left" to hire. That year the number of adult women working jumped nearly 10%. For the first time, they were hired as clerks on the New York Stock Exchange. "We never would have done this before the Pill," admitted one Midwestern publisher who began hiring mostly women. Female workers' median income, however, was not far above the federal poverty line.

For that to change, a new generation of feminists fought to expand the opportunities that the Pill made possible. Title IX, enacted in 1972, ended discrimination in education, throwing open the doors of colleges, law schools and medical schools to women. But the Pill played a role, argues Harvard economist Goldin, in persuading colleges and graduate schools not to reject female applicants on the assumption that they would just wind up getting pregnant and dropping out. From 1970 to '80, Goldin notes, women went from comprising 10% of first-year law students to 36% and from 4% of business-school students to 28%. "I've taken a lot of grief by people who insist the Pill had nothing to do with this, it's all the women's movement," she says. But her research showed the connection between the point at which different states allowed access to the Pill and the progress women in those states made.

Slowly but surely, the availability of the Pill changed the way women viewed their choices. And for many people watching the ground shift beneath the American family, that was the whole problem.

Backlash

Opposition to the Pill among conservative Catholics was consistent from the beginning, but it was only after it had been in widespread use for years that some conservative Protestants began rethinking their views on contraception in general and the Pill in particular. "I think the contraceptive revolution caught Evangelicals by surprise," observes Albert Mohler, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. "We bought into a mentality of human control. We welcomed the polio vaccine and penicillin and just received the Pill as one more great medical advance."

But beginning in the 1990s, many conservative Christians revisited the question of what God intends in marriage and pondered the true nature of the gift of sexuality. The heart of the concern, in this view, is that using contraception can weaken the marital bond by separating sex from procreation.

"Go back a hundred years," Mohler says. "The biblical idea you'd have adults who'd intend to have very active sex lives without any respect to the likelihood of children didn't exist. And it's now unexceptional." This is not to say that everyone has an obligation to have as many children as possible; Mohler has two, not 12, he notes, and as long as a couple is "not seeking to alienate their sexual relationship from the gift of children, they can seek to space or limit the total number of children they have." But the ability to control human reproduction, he says, has done more to reorder human life than any event since Adam and Eve ate the apple.

Women's-rights leaders see multiple agendas at work in the counterrevolution: an attempt not just to roll back access to contraception but also to return women to more traditional roles. "The

cynic in me says, Hmm, they are winning the abortion fight, so they need to raise money some other way, which means go somewhere else. They go to contraception," says NOW president O'Neill of social conservatives. "If the project is to re-establish patriarchal structures, where women are subordinate to male family members, they have to end women's access to contraception."

When the GOP controlled both Congress and the White House after 2000, funding shifted away from family-planning programs and into abstinence education. The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 increased the cost of birth control at campus health clinics four- to fivefold. The promotion of "conscience clauses" allowed hospital workers and pharmacists who have moral qualms about contraception to refuse to fill prescriptions. "We're still fighting those battles in Congress," says Katherine Spillar, executive editor of *Ms.* magazine and executive vice president of the Feminist Majority Foundation. "To think that in 2010, 50 years after the birth control pill, we still have to fight for access and effective family planning — it's painful."