



THE BATTLE RAGES ON

For once the medical profession and the Church were in agreement. Priests declared that abstinence was the only allowable means of birth control. The Journal of the American Medical Association kept repeating "We do not know of any effective method except complete abstinence."

Yet women sought something better. In the 1930's they wrote by the hundreds of thousands to Margaret's "mother department" begging for contraceptive advice. Others bought any kind of useless or even harmful commercial preparation advertised for "feminine hygiene."

So Dickinson kept working. Under his prodding, a few colleagues had begun exploring many devices. One of these was the stem pessary or "gold pin," a thin metal device that extended up into the uterus, then curved out to cover its opening.

Women clutched at it eagerly not only because of the magical connotations of the word "gold," but because it was comparatively cheap and promised to last indefinitely. Unfortunately, however, it was discovered that the pin did not fit snugly, it kept the area constantly open to infection and let sperm enter the uterus as well as bacteria. It therefore performed no magic at all.

Dickinson next asked doctors to explore the "silver ring," a device that slipped over the outside of the uterus and was supposed to hold the entrance closed so tightly that no sperm could enter. This too proved

valueless Next he urged them to examine the rumor that Russian researchers had developed "an almost ideal immunologic technique for men that provided up to a year of sterility", this too proved false Margaret, meantime, was spending her own money to persuade Edinburgh researchers working with mice to try to develop a chemical that suppressed ovulation This research eventually developed "the pill " Yet when the Scotsmen reported their preliminary findings at the Zurich conference of 1930, they admitted fears of their experiments' social implications "It is doubtful," they stated, "whether we shall ever wish to obtain a point where these dangerous weapons will fall into the hands of women and men "

The problem was indeed complex If anyone recognized this, it was Dickinson He saw that more and more people desperately wanted to limit the size of their families, and were trying any and all ways to do it But as yet there was no contraceptive that was at once safe, inexpensive, aesthetically acceptable, and easy to use There were, for instance, many cheap douche ingredients around, but some of these were unsafe and some useless There were also several kinds of cheap condoms, but many husbands refused to use them The best method, the diaphragm plus jelly, needed not only a correct original fitting but a refitting after the birth of each child, making it too costly and difficult for the majority of women

In 1933, however, new hope appeared with the discovery of "the rhythm method " Many investigators had for a long time suspected that women could conceive only on certain days of the month Indeed, during World War 1, two men, Ogino in Japan and Knauss in Austria, had independently observed from examining birth dates that the days of conception coincided quite precisely with the days of soldiers' leaves Put another way, the days of the soldiers' leaves had been "ovulation days " They noted also that these ovulation or conception days occurred twelve to sixteen days before the start of a woman's next menstrual period, or about the middle of the menstrual month It was then evidently that an egg or ovum burst forth from the ovary and traveled down one of the Fallopian tubes where the actual joining with sperm took place They found too that if there were no sperm to join an ovum, it lasted only about thirty-six hours, before it shriveled up and died The conclusion was plain If a woman avoided intercourse during the crucial time that the ovum was alive, she would not conceive Best of all, since avoidance of intercourse was not an artificial means of contraception, the Church approved of its use

After the excitement of this discovery, however, researchers realized that calculating the safe time was not easy, since ovulation had to be figured as occurring at so many days *before* the next menstrual period, not after the last one. This figuring in advance was difficult.

The chief proponent of rhythm, Dr. Leo Latz, recommended that a woman determine her ovulation date by taking her temperature every morning of the month before breakfast, as he had found that on the ovulation day it shot up as much as half a degree. But women often forgot to take their daily temperature, so Dr. Latz suggested instead that they abstain from intercourse for a whole week around the middle of the month. He also devised calendars showing a woman how to determine the week of abstinence according to the length or rhythm of her particular cycle, as menstrual cycles can vary considerably, and he sent "rhythm calendars" flying through the mails. Complicated as the practice of rhythm was, the medical profession nevertheless called it a "ray of light," though a few years later it had to admit that the light was a feeble one. A common story went: Question "What do you call people who practice rhythm?" Answer "Parents."

So birth control plodded along. In 1934 Margaret was still sending Dr. James Cooper around the country to show those doctors who would listen to him how to fit diaphragms. She also sponsored another conference in New York in 1934, though the medical profession in general turned a deaf ear to it. Most of them dubbed anything connected with her or her clinic "sensational contributions by fanatical propagandists or hysterical ladies." In addition, editors of medical journals continued to close their columns to Hannah Stone's reports, and only thirteen of the seventy-five top-graded medical schools were giving any regular instruction in contraception. A few gave incidental instruction, but as late as 1936, nearly fifty percent still gave none at all.

Nevertheless, the public kept clamoring for birth-control information. When they saw that most doctors were either ignorant or silent, they turned once again to the quacks. And when in 1935 a federal court decided that contraceptives could be both advertised and shipped through the mails, if intended for legal use, such a rash of ads broke out in national magazines for what were cautiously called "feminine hygiene" products that almost a million dollars a year in revenue poured into the cash-boxes of their manufactures. Over twenty-one million a year was paid out for the products themselves. Even mail-order houses like Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward participated. One unscrupulous firm, hoping to trade on Margaret's fame, took the

name of "The Marguerite Sanger Company" and jumped from state to state until the law caught up with it

Many of the "feminine hygiene" products were quite worthless. In 1938 *Fortune* magazine reported that "millions of women have been duped and secret tragedies enacted," and that "the medically approved portion of business in female contraceptives is pitifully small." This made the Federal Trade Commission step in to stop some of the more flagrant abuses and the commission issued a statement laying the blame where it felt it belonged. "Neither the government, the AMA or any other organization will give a woman any advice as to the relative merit of these products." The commission obviously did not consider the few clinics in operation throughout the country important enough to mention. Where then was the average woman to turn?

Margaret herself was partly to blame for the current state of affairs. True, she sent out her pamphlets. True, she gave information to the women who came to her Bureau from New York and nearby cities, as well as instruction in techniques to the few doctors who sought her out. But she continued to frustrate Dickinson and the medical profession by listening to the social scientists and echoing their statement that "social and economic distress are more vital reasons for using contraception than medical ones"—a strange statement from a woman who was vigorously promoting a "doctor's bill."

Nevertheless, Dickinson persevered. Several months before, he had succeeded in getting the AMA section on Obstetrics and Gynecology to appoint a committee to see how doctors and social scientists could pull together to get the laws that hampered them changed. The AMA section had procrastinated by referring the matter to its Board of Trustees, who handed it back quickly, using the excuse that the matter was "too controversial to be looked into." Later, a Dr. J. D. Brook practically demanded that an AMA committee look into the subject, but the AMA now refused even to consider appointing a committee to think about it. Matters had come to a complete impasse.

Dickinson was puzzled. Being the kind of man he was, he found it difficult to realize that, in addition to the AMA's old fear of quackery, there were remnants of male chauvinism in the organization's obstinate stand. One doctor had actually started a textbook for nurse-midwives with this sentence: "I myself have never delivered a baby but I will teach you how. After all, a gentleman never soils his hands."