

## THE ORAL CONTRACEPTIVE PILL IN JAPAN

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For the reader to understand the controversy over the use of oral contraceptive pills in Japan, it is important to explain why they have been banned here up until now. Presently, the Koseisho (Japan's Ministry of Health and Welfare) allows hormone pills for the treatment of dysmenorrhea, menstrual disorders, endometriosis, and other gynecological disfunctions.

The hormone pills meant for gynecological disorders have higher hormone contents than the oral contraceptive pills currently in use in other countries. These higher dosage pills usually contain 0.05 to 0.1 mg of estrogen and 0.5 to 5 mg of progesteron, whereas the contraceptive pill contains less than 0.05 mg of estrogen. At present, doctors prescribe the higher dosage hormone pill (meant for gynecological disorders) for contraceptive purposes because Japanese doctors have the legal discretion to prescribe any medication they deem necessary for treatments or purposes other than those specified by the law. Therefore, in Japan there are approximately 300 thousand women taking the higher dosage hormone pills for contraception.

In the seventies, women's groups in Japan made various attempts to legalize the oral contraceptive pill. The Koseisho, however, opposed its legalization on the grounds that the pill could produce side effects and contraindications. Besides the Koseisho's medical reservations, it is also believed that one of the Ministry's chief concerns was with the moral repercussions of a safe and easy contraceptive method that might influence Japanese women's sexual behavior, even perhaps leading them to promiscuity.

For the past decade and a half, however, the Koseisho has been changing its position on the

contraceptive pill. In 1987, the Koseisho published a document called *Guidelines for the Medical Evaluation of Oral Contraceptives*, and simultaneously began a 3-year clinical trial program on oral contraceptives. Their stated reason for reconsidering the issue related to the increasing availability of lower and safer dosage hormone pills. However, women's groups here also feel that the Koseisho was embarrassed that Japan was the only country in the world where the pill had not been officially approved, even though there actually were Japanese women who were using them.

Trials on the pill are now almost finished, and already 12 Japanese pharmaceutical companies – many in partnership with foreign companies such as Schering, Syntex, Wyeth, Ortho, and so on – have put in applications for product approval. Official legalization of contraceptive pill sales, however, has been postponed at least until mid-1992, and some observers believe that the delay is related to recent reports on the declining birth rate in Japan. Many Japanese women feel that the government would rather have Japanese women producing more babies than protecting themselves from unwanted pregnancies.

### WILL JAPANESE WOMEN USE ORAL CONTRACEPTIVES?

In 1990, the Mainichi Newspaper published a report titled *The 20th Public Opinion Poll of National Family Planning*. Five thousand two hundred and seventy questionnaires were sent to women between 16 and 50 years of age. The response rate was 71.5%. According to this report, condoms are the most widely used contraception method in Japan, with 74% of

responding women using them as their main form of birth control. The basal body temperature method, Ogino method, and tubal ligation were each reported by 7.8% of responding women, IUD's were reported by 5 percent, while only 1% of the women who responded to this poll reported using oral contraceptives.

The report also states that 28.5% of the respondents were in favor of legalizing the oral contraceptive pill. However, another 20.5% were against legalization. The chief concerns of women opposing legalization were (a) the side effects of oral contraceptives (71.9%), (b) the questions about the morality of sexual activity (33.5%), and (c) the fear that after legalization of the pill men would no longer share the responsibility for contraception (20.8%).

One question in the poll asked women whether they would use oral contraceptives if and when they become legal. Only 9.9% of the women answered that they would in fact use them, whereas 48.6% indicated they would not.

### CONCLUSION

It will certainly be better to have legal access to oral contraceptive pills that have lower hormone content than the mid-dosage hormone pills now in use. Legalizing oral contraceptive pills as per international law would also necessitate that Japanese doctors give their clients blood tests to check their compatibility with the pill. Presently, doctors tend to prescribe hormone pills without enough blood testing or explanation.

In spite of some of the positive outcomes of legalizing oral contraceptives, I think its use in Japan will not increase dramatically. One reason is that Japanese people have strong negative feelings about taking synthetic hormones into their bodies. This is partly because of cultural reasons, and partly the result of the history of severe side effects from

medicine such as Thalidomide or SMON. Another reason is that most women in Japan are not sexually independent. Most do not even claim to enjoy sex. Therefore to "control contraception" is not a major issue here. Japanese women are not eager to seek new forms of contraception and seem content with the traditional condom. Further, women can easily have abortions in cases of unwanted pregnancies, though, needless to say, no one likes to have one. However, I think it is doubtful that the rate of abortion will decrease in this country if the pill becomes legal. If the abortion rate does decrease I think it will do so only by a small degree.

The reason why women have unwanted pregnancies here is not because of unreliable birth control measures. It is more because most women are unaware of their bodies and are also unable to talk freely about birth control with their partners. Women are hesitant to talk about contraception, fearing that their partners will feel forced to use the condom. In fact, most Japanese women feel they cannot even openly tell their partners when they do not want to make love. Therefore, in a society that has such unequal female/male sexual relationships and so subordinates women, it is questionable whether legalizing oral contraceptives to protect women from unwanted pregnancies will help emancipate them enough to make the correct birth control choices. Additional contraceptive choices for women in Japan will not change female/male sexual relationships, and may even make them worse. In fact, if oral contraceptives become legal, men will not need to discuss contraception at all with their female partners. The man will only have to make sure that the woman takes her daily dosage without fail. And we all know that oral contraceptives have negative side effects and are not suitable for all women.

I would also like to point out that, since the spread of AIDS, the use of condoms as a contraceptive and a prophylactic measure

against the disease itself has gone up worldwide. Therefore, the Japanese government's move to legalize oral contraceptives in the near future seems somewhat anachronistic.

In other countries women feel they have achieved significant reproductive rights if they have legal access to oral contraceptives. In Japan, however, this is not the case. If a woman can freely tell her partner to use a contraceptive, she would rather have him use the safer condom. I feel the most important factor about contraceptive rights in Japan is that women should be sexually independent and have better communication and understanding with their partners before they decide on the contraception method they will use. Merely lifting the ban on oral contraceptives is not sufficient. The government and the medical establishment should introduce a comprehensive sexual education program for the public. In fact, if the government or medical establishment hopes for any significant change they must give as much importance to sex education as they do to the "fall in population" and "rise in abortion" issues in Japan.

### POSTSCRIPT 1

It must be noted that Japanese women's right to abortions and the recent move to legalize oral contraceptives were not achieved through the efforts of Japanese women's groups. The reproductive rights gained by women here have largely been engineered by the government and the medical establishment.

### POSTSCRIPT 2

The March 18th, 1992 *Daily Yomiuri* newspaper report shows that the Koseisho has withheld the legalization of the birth control pill. It is clear that the Koseisho thinks legalizing the birth control pill will trigger

promiscuity in the Japanese society. Therefore, in the era of AIDS, in view of public hygiene and safety, the Koseisho feels it necessary to discourage anything that will liberalize sexual behavior in Japan and perhaps lead to an AIDS epidemic.

I am personally not in favor of the birth control pill. However, I feel it is unfortunate that Koseisho's decision to halt its legalization is taken by a male committee without considering the woman's point of view or women's health. It seems that in Japan crucial decisions regarding women's reproductive rights are usually taken without ever including them in the decision-making process.

### REFERENCES

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