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THE A.M.A. AND BIRTH CONTROL

BY JOSEPH L. MCGOLDRICK, M.D.

TO a group such as this, representing the leading Catholic doctors of the country there is no question concerning the ethics of birth control. Therefore we can assume that we are all in agreement on the fact that birth control or contraception is morally bad. To all of us this is axiomatic but to many non-Catholics this is controversial. However, from this morally correct fact let us take up the expressions of the A.M.A. that have the approval of the Board of Trustees in reference to birth control.

At the A.M.A. Meeting, June 1937 at Atlantic City, N. J., the Committee on Contraception brought in their recommendations which were unanimously passed by the Board of Trustees. At that time there was considerable consternation due to the fact that the impression was formed that the A.M.A. had come out for Birth Control. In some cases this impression was due to incorrect information or misunderstanding of the facts. In order to avoid any confusion at this time I will quote the recommendations as they appeared in the Journal at that time—Vol. 108, No. 26, p. 2218.

1. That the A.M.A. take such action as may be necessary to make clear to the physicians their legal rights in relation to the use of contraceptives.
2. That the A.M.A. undertake the investigation of materials, devices and methods recommended or employed for the prevention of conception with a view to determining the physiological, chemical and biological properties and effects and that the results of such investigation be published for the information of the medical profession.
3. That the Council of Medical Education and Hospitals of the A.M.A. be requested to promote thorough instruction in our medical schools with respect to the various factors pertaining to fertility and sterility, due attention being paid to their positive as well as their negative aspects. Carl H. Davis, M.D., Chairman.

This sounds like meticulous legal construction and omits concrete expression of definition for or against Birth Control. Editorially, *The Journal of the Americas*, in commenting on the recommendations stated: "The Committee on Contraception presented a simple dignified report of its deliberations which was unanimously adopted by the House of Delegates. This places on the various Councils the responsibility for the examination of the products used in contraception. It recognizes also the necessity for teaching the scientific aspects of both fertility and sterility. It recommends that the doctors inform themselves concerning their legal rights and responsibilities in relation to the prevention of conception and it suggests that such practices be in regularly licensed clinics under medical control." Notwithstanding the editorial comment the recommendations are somewhat vague concerning the real issue as to favoring or opposing birth control and naturally could give rise to wrong inferences.

However, the following year, 1938, at the annual meeting, in an attempt to clear up a previous report or for some other reason, the Committee to Study Contraceptive Practices and Related Problems through its Chairman, Dr. Carl H. Davis, presented to the Board of Trustees for submission to the House of Delegates, the following:

"To the House of Delegates of the A.M.A. ;

As a supplement to the report made to you in 1936 and 1937 your Committee on Contraceptive Practices asks your acceptance of the following statement ;

It is not the function of the A.M.A. to tell physicians what therapeutic advice they shall offer patients. However, it has been the policy to investigate various procedures, devices and drugs and publish the results of studies in its official publication for the information of the profession.

The instructions to the Council on Pharmacy and Chemistry and the Council on Physical Therapy to investigate further the materials, devices and procedures used for the purpose of contraception do not indicate any change in the usual policy of the Association nor do they constitute an endorsement by the Association of contraceptive practices." (Arthur Booth, Chairman) Vol. 110, No. 18, p. 1479.

In considering the recommendation of the Committee on Contraceptive Practices from the moral aspect, I feel the legal rights of the physician in relation to the use of contraception should, and must, be in conformity with the moral law. Any physician who advises the use of contraceptives is fully cognizant of the fact that he is attempting to frustrate the sexual act and needs no legal pronouncement to give him sanction. A legal right opposed to a moral right presents an anomalous situation; a legal right presupposes a moral right.

On the second recommendation regarding an investigation of the devices etc. employed for the prevention of conception—such an investigation should be provocative of excellent results. Too frequently we hear that such things are harmless yet in looking through the literature we find such articles as, "Mold infection of the Vagina from Contraceptive jellies," "Trauma and infection from Gold stem pessary," "Vulva Dermatitis from Condom" etc. Further under "Queries and Minor Notes" in *The Journal of the A.M.A.* Vol. 108, No. 5, p. 413 in reference to the use of intrauterine silver rings we find the following answer. "All intrauterine devices are a source of danger to a woman even though introduced under strict antiseptic conditions into a uterus believed to be free from infection at the time." And it continues, "Everyone who has done much obstetrics and gynecologic practice has seen patients illustrating the bad effects of these devices and their inefficiency as contraceptives." In passing, I might add years ago after delivering a patient, in the routine examination of the placenta, I removed a gold stem pessary imbedded in the placenta. Others have claimed that malignancies have resulted from the use of these mechanical devices. I am confident that such an investigation if carried out honestly and thoroughly by individuals not biased by preconceived notions will reveal considerable information contrary to the claims of the contraceptists and commercial firms.

Concerning instruction with respect to the various factors pertaining to fertility and sterility much can be gained. The fertile and sterile couple are the ever present problems to the gynecologist and obstetrician. In these branches up to date the surface has hardly been scratched; our knowledge is haphazard or more or less hit or miss. The sterile couples present a sad story; their feeling of remorse and anxiety presents itself in the question "Do you think the birth control we used is responsible?" At present no doctor can answer that question based on facts, but the experience of many would lead them to answer in the affirmative. The need for such information and instruction is imperative if acquired and disseminated under medical auspices and in accordance with ethical principles.

As a result of the legal and scientific approach, with the accent on approach, to the important question of contraception back in 1937 and the supplementary letter or negative report in 1938 much is left to be desired. The definite stand which has been sought is still held in abeyance. In view of the years that have elapsed since 1936 dodging the issue or reluctance to express an opinion seems to be a conspicuous factor in the deliberations of the Association. This can be corrected by a definition by the Board of Trustees.

As a result of this lack of a positive statement medical colleges in their lectures to students concerning birth control assert that certain devices and drugs employed in the prevention of conception have the

imprimatur of the A.M.A. If the Association is maligned by such teaching methods and such reference, this can be corrected by a positive assertion of the Board of Trustees.

Much misunderstanding or false impression gathered by reason of the more or less indefinite wording of these recommendations can and deserve to be corrected by a forthright positive statement of the Board of Trustees.

The Board of Trustees has had the question of birth control under advisement for a number of years and during this time has accumulated scientific and legal facts together with facts based on extensive experience. They have the expressed views of Winston Churchill on the drastic effects of birth control in England, Henri Giraud on the effects in France, Stalin's about face on birth control and facts on population decline due to birth control in our country prior to the Civil War. Together with these they have the repeatedly expressed views of the Pontiffs based on material reasons as well as moral principles. Supported by such irrefutable facts there should be no delay by the Board of Trustees in expressing themselves positively and without evasion against contraception. While waiting for this pronouncement, Catholic physicians should stimulate action in their Guilds to combat the theory and practice of Contraception and oppose any form of municipal, state or federal assistance for the promotion of contraception. There is no doubt that there is a strong and concerted effort on the part of a large group to get this across and their ambition is to get the backing of the American Medical Association. It is due to the efforts of a few that the association has been rightly influenced not to succumb to the contraceptist pressure. The few should not have to do it alone but must be reinforced by the coordinated support of all the Physicians' Guilds, and the time to act is now.

