

August 1982

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Ann O'Donnell

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Recommended Citation

O'Donnell, Ann (1982) "Discussions of Sex Important in Families," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 49: No. 3, Article 5.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol49/iss3/5>

Discussions of Sex Important in Families

Editor's note: This letter appeared in Panorama, the student newspaper of Ladue High School, St. Louis, Mo. It was written in response to a student's article on the Reagan administration's proposal requiring federally funded family planning clinics to notify parents when their teenagers receive contraceptives. Reprint permission was given by the editors of Panorama.

Dear Students,

I am writing to you as the mother of two children, who have just passed through their teenage years, and it is obvious that my husband, their father, and I have passed through ours. Our family has had five unwed teenage mothers live with us while they waited for their babies to be born. I give this information so you will know I am familiar with the problems you face with regard to decisions about your sexual behavior. These decisions will have a profound impact on your future, the goals you have set, and your ability to maintain lasting human relationships.

I wish to suggest to you that sexual intercourse carries with it a load of emotional and psychological baggage that ought to be attached to a permanent and committed relationship — not just a “caring one.”

It seems to me the regulations proposed by the Reagan administration, requiring notification of parents by tax supported family planning agencies if their daughter is being “treated” with drugs or devices, are reasonable and necessary. I say reasonable because you are more likely to receive good advice from your parents regarding sexual ethics than from entrepreneurs in the family planning business. I say necessary because your parents are morally and legally responsible for your health and well-being.

There is an adage: “When you see a situation you cannot understand, look for the financial interest.” Parents of my opinion note the financial interest of Planned Parenthood in expanding their market to include the teenage population. Tax-supported family planning agencies are funded with relation to the number of “clients” they “treat.” The larger the number of girls that are “fitted with devices” or “treated with hormones,” the larger the check from the federal government.

Parents who oppose the notification requirements perceive Planned Parenthood as a service provider to their children.

More often than not these parents are embarrassed to discuss sex with their children and prefer to turn this most important level of education over to the "experts." They feel unqualified to talk with you and, in my opinion, are rather uptight and puritanical in their attitudes toward sex.

These next remarks are directed in particular to young women, a term I prefer to "girls." It should not have escaped your notice that the proposed regulations deal only with notification of "treatment" of young women by Planned Parenthood type agencies. Birth control agencies have targeted women's reproductive systems. Do you wonder why you are the one to have your fertility obliterated? You are only fertile for about seven days in each menstrual cycle. The young man who is fertile every day is not "treated" at all.

You should be informed studies indicate that sexual intercourse "may be dangerous to your health." Sexual intercourse at an early age and with more than one partner increases a young woman's risk of developing cervical cancer. Dr. Mary Ann Shafer of UCSF estimates that 300,000 to 400,000 teenage women will be treated for Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID). This infection is transmitted through sexual intercourse and is called "the silent sterilizer."

The intrauterine device (IUD) increases a young woman's risk of contracting PID by seven to ten-fold. I will not list the risks of the pill — there is not enough space for over 500 words of contraindications. I view the use of drugs and devices as aggressive manipulation of the fragile reproductive system of a woman. They operate as "overkill" — like using an M-1 to get rid of a butterfly. And, finally, no method of birth control is 100% effective. If it sounds as if I am arguing for that old-fashioned value called chastity, I plead guilty. But, why not try telling that "hunk" to go play handball next time he "comes on" to you?

To young men, can I suggest that the pretty young woman you hold in your arms may simply want to be held and no more. If you do care for her, think about saying "no" to yourself. Sometimes "no" is an appropriate response in truly "caring relationships."

Be patient with your parents; they are learning also. Let us try to learn together within the family. I maintain the Reagan regulations on notification will assist in the learning process. After you reflect on these thoughts, I hope you will agree with me.

— Ann O'Donnell, R.N.

Educator in the Natural Family Planning Field