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Letter from Ireland ...

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Letter from Ireland . . .

The Nineteenth British Congress of Obstetrics & Gynaecology has just been held in Dublin. Whilst the delegates were hearing of the latest safeguards for the obstetric patient "Women's Liberation" pickets were on duty in the street outside the Congress Buildings. Granted the use of prostaglandins was also mooted in the management of therapeutic abortion, but the kernel of the problem seems to be our wish to be completely in control of nature, whether we are creative or destructive. It seems this is more important than control of self. We are presently engaged in public and acid debate concerning the right to import contraceptives. Whilst freedom of conscience of the individual is guaranteed by the Constitution, it appears that their import and sale is prohibited by law. It is also well reported that 26,000 women are using the contraceptive pill in Southern Ireland, and many more import their goods from the Northern part of the country. One can see how the debate can become bitter, and involve our separated brethren who are in the minority. Instruction from the Catholic Hierarchy has been definite and orthodox, but the protest goes on.

In a similar vein, and as a result of this "responsible to self only" attitude, we have depressing statistics on the use of drugs by young people and on the high percentage of middle-aged alcoholics. We always knew that the Irish and French were tops on the International alcoholics table, but the "drug scene" is new to us here. It seems that because we are a little isolated on the edge of Europe that these problems come to us later than our neighbors. As we hope soon to join the European Economic Community (and have recently decimalised our currency with this in view), it is to be hoped that the economic advantages will not be counterweighted by moral disadvantages. However all is not retrogressive. We look forwards in many ways: for example, perinatal mortality is greatly reduced, and compares favourably with the best in Europe. Again, we no longer advertise cigarettes and tobacco on the television screen. This is a great advance in the attempt to persuade young people not to smoke at all, for it is accepted that the smokers take to harder drugs much more easily. Mature people are much less susceptible, and are giving up as a result of the various anti-smoking campaigns. We have many signs of the affluent society nowadays, for example, group practices. Many general practitioners now work in groups of three, four or five, which give a 24 hour and week-end patient cover, but at the same time allows each doctor a reasonable amount of off-duty. Correspondingly, the well-informed patient needs a better service, and will change his doctor if he is not satisfied with results or explanations. He will also demand specialist opinion much sooner, because he knows that the great bulk of the population are entitled to free specialist attention and hospitalisation under the Health Service. He may not avail of this particular service however, but prefer to be insured under the Voluntary Health Insurance Scheme, which is rather similar to the Blue Cross, and of course pays for private attention and hospital. The country has now been divided into five regions for health administration purposes. These regions will be controlled by Boards consisting of medical, civil service and political members, and will be virtually autonomous, responsible only to the Minister. Each region hopes to sully a complete specialist service, so that only patients with unusual problems will have to travel any great distance. However it does mean larger regional hospitals and the elimination of some of the smaller cottage-type hospitals. This may lead to the removal of patients from their own area, and consequent loss of visitors, and a feeling of remoteness and being alone. Of course all this sacrifice of personal feelings is in the interests of general efficiency and in the advancement of medical treatment. It is to be devoutly hoped that in this Christian country we will always remember that patients are composed of body and soul, and are not just statistics.

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