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Letter from Ireland ...

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The Nineteenth British Congress of Obstetrics & Gynaecology has just been held in Dunedin. Whilst the delegates were hearing of the latest safeguards for the obstetric patient "Womb 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. A vast 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 North part of the country. One can see how the debate can become bitter, and invol 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 presence of middle-aged alcoholics. We always knew that the Irish and French were tops in the International alcohols 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 to our neighbors. As we hope soon to join the European Economic Community (and have already decriminalised 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 forward in many ways: for example, perinatal mortality is greatly reduced, and we compare 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 harder drugs much more readily. 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 partner a reasonable amount of off-duty. Correspondingly, the well-informed patient now has better service, and will change his doctor if he is not satisfied with results or explanations. The patient 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 National 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 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 satisfy a complete specialist service, so that only patients with unusual problems will have to travel any great distance. However it means 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 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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23 St. Patrick's Hill
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June 10, 1971.

Letter from New Zealand....

Financially it has been a bad year, with falling export earnings and internal inflation. Our pastoral economy is very vulnerable, but manufacturing is expanding and we are making remarkable sales such as carpets in Paris, electrical parts in Indonesia, automobile parts in U.S.A., and even aircraft in Australia. This beautiful country will soon be smiling again.

The birth rate fell steadily from a peak of 26.4 per 1,000 in 1960 to 22.1, following worldwide trends, but in an underpopulated country the implications are serious. The Pill is taken by about 25% of all childbearing women, a world record which we share with Australia.

We excel other Western countries in illegitimate births which now number 13% of all births. This is an interesting manifestation of a sex-obsessed, but outwardly puritanical, community. Still, it's an ill wind — without the unmarried girls obstetrics would be a dying specialty.

I have recently led a committee which extracted improved maternity fees from the Department of Health. For an average general practitioner case, with 13 antenatal visits, normal delivery and postnatal check the fee has risen from (expressed in US dollars) $62 to $77. Specialists receive the same fee, and charge the patient approximately another $75.

With the threat of legalised abortion spreading in a wave of hysteria round the world from Britain to New York, and even to South Australia, we have taken defensive action and started the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child. President is Prof. A.W. Lilley who introduced intratherine transfusion for Rh affected babies. A Jewish mayor and I are Vice-Presidents. A broad spectrum of religious and civic leaders are on the committee. Our success has been phenomenal; within one year we have gained 15,000 members (out of a total population of 2.5 million). Everywhere there is great enthusiasm. At a meeting to found a branch in Dunedin (pop. 110,000) there was an attendance of 2,000.

For our first Annual General Meeting in July we feel sufficiently confident to bring out as a guest speaker Mrs. Jill Knight of the House of Commons, London. She will be an invaluable ally. The opposition Abortion Law Reform Association has started, with 200 members, but we hope to give the politicians such a fright that they will not dream of introducing liberalised legislation. Prof. Lilley and I have been invited to speak at a meeting to launch a similar society in Melbourne in June.

Catholic physicians must fight unceasingly to protect the unborn child who is the modern martyr. This may mean for us professional, social and financial martyrdom too, but we will not have to suffer any more than the children do, or than Christ did before them. At least life will not be dull.

H.P. Dunn
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May 8, 1971