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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## What Every Girl Should Know

By [GAIL COLLINS](#)

A thousand years ago, popular birth control methods in the Western world included spitting into the mouth of a frog, eating bees and wearing the testicles of a weasel. In Córdoba, Spain, which was supposed to be on the scientific cutting edge, women were told to leap up and down vigorously after sex, and then jump backward nine times.

This is by way of saying that on Sunday we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the birth control pill. We live in troubled times. But let's give thanks that we avoided the era of the weasel testicles.

Like a great many of our anniversaries, this one is a movable feast. The Food and Drug Administration actually gave G.D. Searle the go-ahead to market the first oral contraceptive (not counting bees) on June 23, 1960. But the F.D.A. announced its intention to approve the pill on May 9, which also happens to be Mother's Day this year and, therefore, too good to resist.

This is a story about science, and obviously sex. But it's also a saga about getting information.

American women had been limiting the size of their families long before the pill came along. In the 19th century, the fertility rate was plummeting, and ads for everything from condoms to douching syringes helped keep urban newspapers solvent. My favorite factoid from this period is that a company called National Syringe offered a model with changeable nozzles so it could be used for both birth control and watering plants.

What women did not have was the ability to figure out what actually worked. The powers-that-be believed that the only appropriate form of birth control was celibacy. "Can they not use self control?" demanded Anthony Comstock, the powerful crusader for the Sexual Purity campaign. "Or must they sink to the level of the beasts?"

Comstock managed to get New York authorities to grant him the powers to both arrest and censor, and he bragged that he sent 4,000 people to jail for helping women understand, and use, birth control. He seemed to take particular pleasure in the fact that 15 of them had committed suicide.

One of his targets was Margaret Sanger, a nurse who wrote a sex education column, "What Every Girl Should Know," for a left-wing New York newspaper, The Call. When Comstock banned her column on venereal disease, the paper ran an empty space with the title: "What Every Girl Should Know: Nothing, by Order of the U.S. Post Office."

Sanger was the first person to publish an evaluation of all the available forms of birth control. As a reward, she got a criminal obscenity charge. She fled to Europe to avoid going to jail, and her husband was imprisoned for passing out one of her pamphlets. In the end, he got 30 days, and Anthony Comstock got a chill during the trial that led to a fatal case of pneumonia.

It was the courts that eventually gave women the right to not only have access to birth control, but also information that told them what was available and how to use it. (The first big victory had the memorable name of U.S. v. One Package of Japanese Pessaries.) Sanger, meanwhile, helped bring together the wealthy donors and brilliant researchers who would bring forth the first effective oral contraception.

"There's gonna be some changes made right here on Nursery Hill," sang Loretta Lynn. "You've set this chicken your last time 'cause now I've got the pill."

And we lived happily ever after. Except that over the last 20 years, protests from the social right have made politicians frightened of mentioning birth control and school boards frightened of including it in the curriculum.

Cecile Richards, the president of Planned Parenthood, remembers getting a pretty thorough grounding in sex and the ways to prevent pregnancy when she was in school — back in the days when the raciest thing you saw on television was Rob and Laura Petrie waking up in twin beds on the opposite side of the room. "Kids growing up today watch 'Gossip Girl' and all these shows where every teenager is having sex every day — and now we don't teach sex education in school," she noted.

Even though 100 million women take the pill every day, to the great relief of 100 million or so of their partners, the terror of mentioning birth control is so great that the humongous new health care reform act has managed to avoid bringing it up at all. Advocates are hoping that when the regulations are finally written, they will require health insurance to cover birth control pills like any other drug. But nobody is sure.

"If the administration would announce tomorrow that all birth control would be free for every woman in America, I think the health care plan would gain 30 points in popularity overnight," said Richards.

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