



Reproductive Rights and Wrongs

A Hard Pill to Swallow: The 10

In Europe, it's known as RU 486, after the original French manufacturer Roussel Uclaf. Here in the United States, it's known by the generic name mifepristone. But for women involved in the 10-year struggle to win approval for its use, the abortion pill is the Holy Grail of reproductive rights. It holds the promise of a safe, non-surgical method to end pregnancy in the privacy of a doctor's office, and would effectively deprive anti-choice zealots of their most visible targets—abortion clinics.

There are still hurdles before the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) gives final approval for manufacture and use of mifepristone, but the light at the end of the tunnel is getting brighter. Those involved in the approval process are optimistic—even confident—that as we roll into 2000, American women will at long last have another choice.

The saga of mifepristone is long and convoluted, dominated more by political wrangling than medical science. First synthesized in a French lab in 1980, mifepristone blocks progesterone, the hormone that helps maintain a pregnancy. It's used most effectively during the first two months of pregnancy in combination with misoprostol, an approved ulcer medication. The process takes three visits to a doctor, beginning with a dose of 600 milligrams of mifepristone. Two days later, the patient takes 400 milligrams of misoprostol to aid contractions, and remains in the doctor's office for several hours. Two weeks later, she returns for a follow-up visit. The results are similar to a heavy menstrual period lasting about a week, with common side effects of cramps, nausea and vomiting—similar to the morning sickness of pregnancy.

French women have used mifepristone since 1988, and by 1992 both Sweden and the United Kingdom had approved the drug. To date, more than 200,000 women in Europe have used it with virtually no health risks or side effects. If approved in this country, up to 50 percent of all surgical abortions now being performed could be accomplished with doses of mifepristone.

In a perfect world, FDA approval would have come swiftly and decisively because mifepristone works and it's safe. Plus, scientists believe the drug has other impor-

tant medical uses, including treating breast cancer, Cushing's disease, endometriosis, fibroid tumors and meningioma—a brain tumor that predominantly affects women. But the anti-choice lobby has thrown up a series of road blocks since the early '80s to prevent mifepristone from crossing the Atlantic. After threats of boycotts, Hoechst A.G., the German parent company of Roussel Uclaf, refused in 1989 to market mifepristone in the United States. During George Bush's presidency, anti-choice activists won concessions from the FDA to ban imports of the drug.

All the while, pro-choice activists kept hope and the issue alive, working steadily to pave the way for FDA approval. In 1992, Roussel Uclaf announced it would work with a U.S. drug company willing to manufacture mifepristone. So activists went in search of a contraceptive manufacturer indifferent to political pressure and interested in vast potential profits. "In 1992, we did a series of meetings with Ortho and Wyeth-Ayerst encouraging them to take this product on," says Jennifer Jackman, policy and research director at the Feminist Majority Foundation, one of the leaders in the mifepristone effort. "They said anti-progestin research wasn't in their product line." Three smaller companies seemed interested but then backed out, she says, most likely because of the controversy.

Bill Clinton's 1992 election was the jolt pro-choice activists needed. Among his first executive orders in January 1993 was a directive to the FDA to re-evaluate the import ban on mifepristone and assess ways to promote its testing and manufacture.

In the following year, a major log jam was blasted when Roussel Uclaf donated its U.S. patent rights to the Population Council, a nonprofit research organization based in New York and a major supporter of mifepristone. In 1995, the council began a year of clinical trials at 17 sites with 2,121 women. The results, published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the *Archives of Family Medicine*, were an unmitigated success. Nearly all of the women in the study said they would recommend the abortion pill to others and they would choose it again if necessary.

In 1996, the FDA accepted the clinical data and issued approval for the Population

Year Fight for Mifepristone

By Annette Fuentes

Council to take the next step in bringing mifepristone to the U.S. market. A pharmaceutical manufacturer was needed and Gedeon Richter, a European company, stepped forward. But when the subject is abortion, Murphy's Law is operative. Gedeon Richter quit without explanation in early 1997 and the approval process slammed to a halt. Had the company not backed out, mifepristone could have been available two years ago. "Abortion politics is the overarching thing," says Sandra Waldman, spokeswoman for the Population Council. "It meant that no existing pharmaceutical company would touch the drug."

So if no company would get involved, a new one had to be formed. Enter Danco, a group of private investors that came together to bring the abortion pill to the U.S. market. Danco won't say much about its owners or how they operate because of concerns about anti-abortion extremists. "We're a start-up pharmaceutical company dedicated to women's health," says Danco spokeswoman Heather O'Neil.

Working with the Population Council, Danco is steering mifepristone through the painstaking FDA approval process, which O'Neil says is moving smoothly. "The FDA's outstanding issues are about manufacturing," she says. "All the clinical trials were done using Roussel's drugs. The FDA now has to inspect the new manufacturing plant." Danco will then distribute the drug directly to doctors' offices for use under strict supervision. O'Neil wouldn't say where the drug is being manufactured because of security concerns, but did say Danco is confident that mifepristone will be available by the end of the year.

Not if the anti-choice politicians in Congress have their way. As the curtain falls on the presidential impeachment show, the House and Senate will resume their business, and on the agenda of several representatives is defeating FDA approval of mifepristone. Last summer, the House passed by a vote of 223 to 202 an amendment to prohibit the FDA from funding the testing, development or approval of any drug that causes abortion. Authored by Rep. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.), the amendment was tagged onto an agricultural appropriations bill. Although it died during

Senate-House conferencing, Coburn and fellow conservative Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.) have distinguished themselves as tenacious foes of women's reproductive freedom. Smith led an attack on an amendment to guarantee health insurance coverage of birth control for federal employees. During the debate, Smith sought to define common contraceptives, including the IUD, as forms of abortion and to prohibit insurers from covering them.

"There were nine pro-choice seats gained in the last election but we still have an anti-choice Congress," says Bonnie McEwan, legislative director of Planned Parenthood. "We expect there will be a fight, but we expect to win." McEwan noted that the new House leadership has vowed to focus less on the conservative morality issues, such as abortion, but she doesn't believe Coburn and Smith "will just fall into line with the speaker."

Women in the United States are not the only ones who will reap the benefits of mifepristone when it finally becomes available. The FDA's stamp of approval will likely trigger activity in other countries, says Sally Ethelson of Population Action International, a research and advocacy organization in Washington. "Many developing countries do not have the regulatory systems in place to evaluate drugs coming onto the market," she says. "So many of them look at FDA approval because it's considered to be the most stringent evaluation process in the world. If the FDA approves mifepristone, it would make it available in many other countries." Given the World Health Organization's estimate of 70,000 to 100,000 deaths yearly from unsafe or self-inflicted abortions, providing women with a safe choice is simple humanitarianism.

Still, nothing about mifepristone and the abortion debate can be simple. Even as mifepristone hovers within reach, its approval so tantalizingly close, anti-choice extremists have upped the ante in the past year with acts of violence that can only be understood as an assault on women's autonomy. "Nobody gets to what underlies all this," McEwan says. "Margaret Sanger said it 80 years ago: The established order doesn't want to see women truly empowered." ■

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The Good Guys

By Kristin Kolb



Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.)

The leading senator in the fight for reproductive choice, Boxer fought hard for the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act. This year, she will reintroduce the Family Planning and Choice Protection Act, which would mandate Medicaid coverage of abortion, full contraceptive coverage in all health plans, federal protection of abortion clinics, an increase in funding for reproductive health research, and approval and distribution of mifepristone.



Sen. Olympia Snowe (R-Maine)

The first-term senator served in the House for 16 years and is a former co-chairwoman of the Congressional Women's Caucus. Snowe isn't afraid to deviate from the Republican Party line, particularly on women's health issues. She was a vocal critic of the global gag rule the Pro-Life Caucus pushed through Congress. She sponsored the Equity in Prescription Insurance and Contraceptive Coverage Act, which would have required health plans to cover all contraceptives—a major issue as only 15 percent cover the five major contraceptives (the pill, diaphragm, IUD, Depo-Provera and Norplant). Although the bill didn't pass, Snowe successfully amended an appropriations bill to require full contraceptive coverage for federal employees.

The Real Smeal

The Feminist Majority Speaks Out

Since its founding in 1989, the Feminist Majority Foundation's National Clinic Defense Project has been charting the rise of anti-abortion extremism and providing direct aid to clinics at risk of harassment and violence. Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority Foundation, recently spoke with Annette Fuentes about the future of reproductive rights in this country.

You must feel like Cassandra because you've been warning about the growing violence by anti-abortion extremists for so long.

It's been very difficult. Initially, people just said I had an attitude. But our knowledge was based on experience and research. We knew this was getting deadly. [Anti-abortion extremists] were first bombing empty buildings. They were giving specific death threats and we thought they'd go to an assassination strategy. They did. The worst, of course, is they have now gone to lethal bombings, sniper attacks and butyric acid attacks. People do not understand because the reporting has predominantly perpetuated a lone-wolf theory.

I believe there will be a tremendous backlash against [the anti-abortion extremists] if we have the will to stay the course and fight. Three groups—Planned Parenthood, the National Abortion Federation and the Feminist Majority Foundation—are working together to provide security and help to clinics. The NOW Legal Defense Fund is helping legally. It is a tremendous work load. As [the November 1998 murder of Dr. Barnett Slepian] was happening, a clinic in Raleigh, N.C., received a bomb threat that was serious. That same week, we had the anthrax scare and a hoax bomb in the Birmingham, Ala., clinic that was bombed



before. There were 19 butyric acid attacks, fake bombing attacks, lethal bombs and an assassination, all in 1998.

Why have the media and the government been slow to

react to anti-abortion terrorism?

Part of it is just simply denial. But secondly, it seems like our democracy is so stable. There can't really be terrorists here. It almost makes us look extreme by reporting what's happening.

January 22 was the twenty-sixth anniversary of Roe v. Wade. What is the future of this important legal milestone?

Roe v. Wade is at risk. Until [the November 1998] election, Congress was three votes shy of overriding the president's veto of the [late-term abortion] ban. Next election we still have to worry about losing the ability to stop a filibuster. If we lose the presidency in the year 2000 and keep the majority of both the House and Senate dominated by the right, then we could lose the Supreme Court again. Much hangs in the balance. George W. Bush is opposed to abortion. So we cannot be fooled. Women's rights are struggling.

I want to say to all feminists: If you took a siesta, if you decided it was all solved, forget it. We need you now if we're going to secure the victories of the 20th century for the 21st century. If we're going to stop the terror, we've got to change the political climate and we have to stop the extremists. It all goes hand in hand. We had to expect that if we advanced feminism, they would start shooting us. We have a patriarchy that feels threatened. If we're going to solidify our gains, we've got to rally our forces now. There's no social revolution that didn't have to worry about the backlashes. ■

Rep. Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.)



When it comes to reproductive rights, Nita Lowey is miles ahead of her congressional colleagues. As chairwoman of the House Pro-Choice Task Force, Lowey sponsored more pro-choice legislation in the 105th Congress than any other senator or representative. She has fought to increase funding to prevent teen pregnancy, ensure that health plans provide women with access to OB/GYNs, institute federal security at abortion clinics and repeal the law that prohibits abortions at overseas military hospitals. She also was the House sponsor of Snowe's contraceptive coverage amendment and Boxer's Family Planning and Choice Protection Act. Lowey is a leading Democratic candidate to replace Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan in 2001.

Money Changes Everything

The Right Invests To Limit Choice

Religious right and anti-choice activists are putting their money where their politics are. Over the past five years, a handful of small but aggressive investment funds hot-wired to the Catholic Church and Christian fundamentalist groups have been spreading the gospel of conservatism the old-fashioned, Wall Street way.

Most conservative funds, like the Orlando-based Timothy Fund, grounded in Christian fundamentalism, simply screen out investments that offend its values. President Art Ally gets investment advice from Pro Vita Advisors of Ohio, which monitors "corporate America's direct and indirect involvement in the abortion industry," and from Life Decisions International, a New York anti-choice group that tracks supporters of Planned Parenthood. American Express and Merrill Lynch fail the Timothy screen because of their contributions to the nonprofit.

Other funds use shareholder activism and strong-arm tactics to influence corporate policies, philanthropy and product lines. The Dallas-based Aquinas Funds, for example, goes for high performing investments and tries to effect change. Aquinas adheres to the guidelines of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, which opposes not only abortion but contraception in general. As shareholders in drug companies Pharmacia & Upjohn and American Home Products, Aquinas has lobbied to phase out their lines of birth control drugs. Aquinas also wants to put warning labels on contraceptives, alerting consumers that they could induce abortion—an anti-choice myth, not medical reality.

In 1997, CEO Frank Rauscher boasted that Aquinas had used its stockholder

status to convince major pharmaceutical companies—including Teva, Merck, Abbott Labs, Johnson & Johnson and Pharmacia & Upjohn—to neither produce nor distribute mifepristone. Rauscher told *Mutual Funds* magazine in 1997 that his argument to company management was economic, not religious: "As a shareholder, we were concerned about the litigation possibilities that may arise if one of the companies that we owned got involved in that pill." Rauscher also says Aquinas pressured Chase Manhattan Bank to stop contributing to Planned Parenthood.

Conservative investment funds have hardly racked up fat profits for their flocks. The performances of both Aquinas and Timothy have been less than dynamic since they were founded in 1994, but that's not unusual in the arena of socially responsible investing. The real question is how successful their pressure tactics have been in influencing companies that support reproductive health choices. That is more difficult to gauge. While Rauscher claims to have scared off drug companies from making mifepristone, he hasn't produced documentation to prove it. And American pharmaceutical companies were intimidated by the controversy surrounding mifepristone long before Aquinas appeared on the scene.

Jim Minow, Planned Parenthood's development director, says corporate support has increased in recent years. As the names of individual donors are kept confidential, Minow would not say whether Chase Manhattan has been a donor. But he insisted that "no anti-choice organizations have ever been successful in pressuring any corporation from continuing support of Planned Parenthood." **A.F.**

Rep. Christopher Smith (R-N.J.)

Smith—a huge fan of the Christian rock group Petra—is serving his tenth term in Congress. Co-chairman of the House Pro-Life Caucus, he successfully sponsored the global gag rule, a bill to prohibit funding for international family planning organizations that advocate choice. Smith also co-sponsored the Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act. "Those who fashion themselves as 'advocates of children' and 'pro-women' while promoting or even acquiescing to abortion," he says on his Web site, "are either hypocrites or are living in an unhealthy state of denial."



The Bad Guys

By Kristin Kolb



Rep. Jo Ann Emerson (R-Mo.)

Emerson—the first woman elected to Congress from Rush Limbaugh's hometown—introduced the Right to Life Amendment in 1997. This constitutional amendment would declare any reference to the word "person" in the Constitution to mean "any unborn person." She also co-sponsored the Partial-Birth Abortion Act. According to Emerson, *Roe v. Wade* "has done little to set women free" and denied women "the opportunity to love and be loved in America."



Rep. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.)

A physician who boasts he has "delivered more than 3,000 babies," the three-term congressman is a darling of the religious right. Coburn co-sponsored the Partial Birth Abortion Act and passed legislation prohibiting medical students from performing abortions. His Child Custody Protection Act would make it a federal crime to help an out-of-state minor get an abortion in states that do not have parental consent laws. Coburn is an obsessive promoter of sexual abstinence—he has crusaded across northeastern Oklahoma giving "abstinence education presentations" complete with medical photos that "graphically display the consequences of sexual relations outside of a monogamous marital relationship."



Quinacrine Crimes

By Christine McConville

Now banned in both India and Chile, the battle over quinacrine appears to be waning. More than 100,000 women have been sterilized by the drug, and its use has sparked a worldwide debate about health risks and the motives of its supporters.

Quinacrine is inserted as a pellet into the uterus. It dissolves, travels into the Fallopian tubes and causes scarring, which blocks the tubes and causes irreversible sterilization. Lab tests have found that quinacrine also causes cells to mutate, increasing the risk of cancer.

The drug's sole distributors are Stephen Mumford, head of the North Carolina-based Center for Research on Population and Security, and Elton Kessel, secretary general of the International Federation for Family Health in Leasburg, N.C. They argue that quinacrine is safer and cheaper than surgical sterilization, and that they are saving women's lives by preventing unwanted pregnancies in countries with a high risk of death from childbirth complications. Mumford and Kessel have handed out the drug in 19 countries—including Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan and the United States—primarily by linking up with other physicians who advocate its use. And according to a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, several Vietnamese women were given quinacrine during routine gynecological exams not knowing its irreversible impact.

Mumford and Kessel are supported by the right-wing Leland Fikés and Scaife Family foundations. The Federation for American Immigration Reform also has advocated for the distribution of quinacrine to researchers, clinicians and government health agencies worldwide.

Despite these well-heeled and well-connected supporters, no regulatory body currently supports quinacrine's use as a sterilant. Both the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the

Losing Choice Worldwide

Maquiladora Tests Screen Out Pregnant Women

Mexico's maquiladora operators like the abundant, cheap labor of their mostly female work force. But they don't like the fact that women can get pregnant. That's because Mexican labor codes mandate a generous array of maternity benefits, including six weeks paid leave before and after giving birth, as well as a guarantee that women's jobs will be waiting for them when they return.

The solution for many maquiladoras is to use urine tests as part of the job application process to screen out pregnant women. Even after women are hired, they often are forced to submit to periodic pregnancy tests to keep their jobs. Several corporations, including Siemens, a German electronics company, and Lear, a U.S. auto parts manufacturer, require women to report to infirmaries with proof that they're menstruating.

Such abuses were carefully documented by Human Rights Watch in a report released last December, which details 53 cases of pregnancy discrimination at 50 factories along the U.S.-Mexico border and in Baja California. The culprits are a who's who of the multinational export sector: Samsung, Matsushita, Sunbeam-Oster, Sanyo, Pacific Dunlop, Johnson Controls and Tyco International, as well as Siemens and Lear. The maquiladora sector is a heavyweight in the Mexican economy, employing more than 1 million workers and generating \$55 billion in exports last year.

The companies make no bones about their pregnancy policies and practices, even though they would seem to violate both Mexico's labor laws and Constitution, which prohibit sex discrim-

ination. That's because the Mexican government has sided with the multinationals by claiming that pregnancy testing isn't a form of sex discrimination, but rather a legitimate part of the hiring process. Even labor unions have refused to take a stand for their women members and, in some cases, have colluded with the factory owners in shutting women out of jobs. "In Matamoros, where they have the highest unionization rate among maquilas, a woman said one union would not send her out to a job because she was pregnant," report author Le Shawn Jefferson says. "So she went to a different hiring hall, didn't reveal her pregnancy and had no trouble getting a job referral."

In 1997, Human Rights Watch filed a petition with the U.S. Labor Department, charging that the Mexican government is violating NAFTA side agreements, which prohibit abusive labor practices. How well NAFTA works to protect Mexican women will be a good test of the covenants that labor advocates on both sides of the border pushed for. So far, talks between Mexico and the United States on the issue have been grinding along, says Jefferson. Although, in one positive development, the Labor Department told Human Rights Watch it would convene a conference on women and work in Mexico sometime this year.

Meanwhile, women's autonomy and health are in daily jeopardy because of workplace discrimination. "We have heard of women hiding their pregnancies or delaying prenatal care because they didn't want to miss work or were afraid to ask for a day off," Jefferson says. "Women are making reproductive health choices under threat." **A.F.**

World Health Organization have recommended against further human trials of quinacrine sterilization. Last year, the FDA ordered Mumford and Kessel to destroy their existing quinacrine stock.

India's Supreme Court banned quinacrine sterilization in 1998 after six years of illegal clinical trials. That year, quinacrine also was banned in Chile—where it was first introduced in the '70s—due to intensive organizing efforts in the

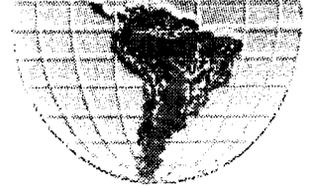
women's health movement and recommendations by the World Health Organization.

But the fight to end quinacrine use is far from over. Mumford says he plans to continue manufacturing and distributing it overseas. The Committee on Women, Population and the Environment (CWPE), an opponent of quinacrine, thinks Mumford will concentrate on countries with weak regulatory mechanisms and strong population

control policies, such as China.

"Mumford has argued that feminists who oppose quinacrine are 'the pope's handmaidens,' the enemies of birth control," CWPE's Betsy Hartman told the *Boston Globe*. "But the conflict over quinacrine is not about pro-choice vs. anti-choice. It's about safe vs. unsafe contraception." ■

Christine McConville is a writer in Chicago.



Reeling in Rio

Carnival confronts the global economy

By Kelly Candaele

On the day before the start of Carnival, Marilene Monteiro's young students practice the intricate moves of the samba, the dance they will display in the Carnival parade. While her "Union of the Heart" samba school has been preparing for this year's parade virtually since the last one ended, Monteiro is still scrambling for sponsors and money to pay for costumes, a parade float and other Carnival essentials.

Her students are from the poor areas of Rio de Janeiro, the *favelas*, where makeshift homes are dug into the granite mountainsides that surround Rio and symbolize a deeply divided society. Carnival has been called a "ritual of inversion," five days when the poor and dispossessed own the streets, asserting their physical and cultural presence through ostentatious costumes and the samba's pounding Afro-Brazilian rhythms. But Monteiro is less interested in sociological insights than in tracking down another couple hundred *real* (about \$100) for her school. "This year seems to be more difficult for some reason,"

year there is an added dimension. The world is watching Brazil's weakening economy for signs of revival after the value of the *real* was cut in half against the dollar when frenzied international currency traders fled the Brazilian market, fearing a Russian-style meltdown in the tropics. There are worries that the "contagion" in the world's eighth-largest economy could spread, first to Argentina and then around the world.

Brazil is also a test case for the International Monetary Fund's ability to police the world economy by imposing austerity measures on economies in need of "structural reform." In IMF-speak, "reform" means accepting free trade, open currency markets, privatization of state run enterprises, work force flexibility and restrained federal spending. In Brazil, the \$41.5 billion the IMF has promised to shore up the economy comes not with strings attached but with a rope. Growing numbers of Brazilians believe that rope will be used to hang them. Outside the "Sambadrome," the mile-long parade route in downtown Rio, attorney Francisco Chagas clutches his throat when asked about the role of the IMF in the Brazilian economy: "They give us the money, they grab us right here and they tell us to be quiet."

President Fernando Henrique Cardoso is an advocate of "modernizing" the Brazilian economy along fairly orthodox macroeconomic lines. Several large state-run enterprises have been privatized since his first election as president in 1994, and he has encouraged openness and flexibility for foreign investment and changes in Brazil's labor codes, particularly for public employees. The leader of the Brazilian Social Democratic Party (PSDB), the centermost of Brazil's several left-leaning parties, Cardoso was architect of the 1993 "real plan" when, as finance minister, he helped tame the country's rampant inflation by tying the Brazilian currency to the dollar. He was re-elected to a second term last October, defeating Workers Party (PT) candidate Luis Inacio da Silva, popularly known as "Lula," and several others by a substantial margin.

Cardoso has accepted IMF and establishment premises that the problems with Brazil are internal: large budget and trade deficits, crony capitalism and too much involvement of the state in the market. He agreed to \$16 billion in federal and state budget cuts in return for the first installment of the IMF loan last year. Prior to the dramatic January devaluation of the Brazilian currency, Cardoso tried to sustain the confidence of foreign investors by defending the value of the *real* through high interest rates that kept foreign and domestic investment in the country. He also made moves to cut Brazil's federal budget deficit, and he pushed through a tax on retired federal employees, whom many Brazilians saw as part of a pampered elite.



Under the IMF plan, Brazilians are losing their shirts.

she laments. "The businesses that we have always depended upon to help us are not as willing this time."

There is always a political subtext to Brazilian Carnival. The samba school theme songs and *enredos*, the story lines of the parade performances, often contain references to the common people's struggle for equality and freedom, in addition to an overall appreciation of the sumptuous spectacle of life. But this

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