

HORMONAL HORRORS--

Oral contraceptives are the most effective way (except for sterilization) to prevent pregnancy. They may be also used for therapeutic purposes. They are convenient and, for most women, free of serious or unpleasant side effects.

This may sound familiar to you, if you have ever read the standard information that comes with any package of birth control pills.

Yet 19 out of 20 women who talked to me had problems with the Pill. Obviously, if women want to hear about what really can and does happen, they are going to have to start listening to each other, instead of being lulled into a false sense of safety by those in the medical profession.

Doctors are supposed to tell you about possible side effects, but it seems few do. They will probably give you a booklet with a dense, miniature type outlining the benefits and risks. This may be all a woman hears, after her doctor says, "The Pill is the best way to prevent pregnancy."

Standard information says vomiting and nausea happen to about 10 per cent of women on the Pill, while other side effects are supposed to be even less common.

However, many women became sick or even died, so levels of estrogen were reduced and now between one and two out of every 100 women on the Pill get pregnant every year. A trade that should have been made earlier.

Women are not the only ones concerned.

A father told me when his daughter recently moved from Victoria to Cambridge to go to university, she found out the Pill she had been prescribed here was banned in England.

It contained 50 micrograms of Mestranol, a kind of Estrogen, the strongest legal dose. It is contained in Norinyl and Ortho-Novum pills

still prescribed in Canada.

Women are not silent about the problems of the Pill, even if doctors are. University of Victoria (UVIC) students are speaking out. Karen Ballinger, fourth year creative writing; Shannon Passmore, professional year education; Claire Walker, fourth year arts; Alicia Parker, third year social work; and Lisa Crampton, fourth year biology, all have stories to make you think a little more carefully on the drug you take every day for as long as 20 years.

KAREN: I started taking the Pill a long time ago, when it first came out about 20 years ago. People thought, "This is the answer, the miracle birth control method." I was at SFU, and I went to the student clinic. The doctor gave me a lecture about the difference between plants and animals. He said that just because he was giving me a prescription, it wasn't a license to go out and have sex all over the place. The walls were really thin, everyone could hear him. It was pretty humiliating.

It was hard at that time. Some pharmacies would only give out one month of the year prescription at a time. I don't know why, if they just wanted to get the dispenser fee each time, or if it was a power trip or what.

It was only from talking to other women that I found which pharmacies would give out six months at a time.

Doses [of hormones] were heavier then, I gained weight, experienced depression and anxiety attacks. I thought I was having a nervous breakdown. It got to the point where I wouldn't go out of the house, go to a restaurant or drive a car.

No doctor ever said it could be the Pill.

I was on the Pill for five years straight, I only went off it when I wanted to have a child. A year later (after I went off) those symptoms went away. That was when I made the connection.

I waited for six months before I tried to get pregnant. If women tried right away, it seemed like they either had a miscarriage or they couldn't get pregnant at all.

In those days, we still thought the doctors were gods. Looking back on it, it seems like a childish belief.

Doctors never checked blood pressure, family history or asked if I smoked. I smoked then, but they hadn't made the connection yet of the risks that were involved when you took the Pill.

They never told me anything. I see us as having been guinea pigs. I don't think it's a safe birth control method.

SHANNON: I've been on it since I was thirteen and I've never been off it. Minovril was the first -- it's not supposed to be a good kind, but my doctor never told me. Another doctor told me later (when I came to UVIC) it was too strong for what I needed.

It was my idea to go on the Pill. I was sexually active, and scared shitless of being pregnant. She just gave me a prescription, I didn't need permission.

She was really good, she explained the pros and cons and said I shouldn't smoke. She only told me the obvious stuff though. She said when you're young it's not a big deal.

There was a lot of stuff I never thought of: spotting (irregular bleeding), weight gain, headaches. I just lived with it. I was so young I never knew anything different (from how my body reacted to the Pill).

It was only in talking to friends that I