

PUBLIC HEALTH

Contraceptive Loop Safe

➤ NO EVIDENCE OF CANCER has been found as a result of more than 2,000 insertions of the Lippes Loop into the wombs of those trying to plan their parenthood.

Only 41 pregnancies occurred in 1,713 women using the loop after a total of 2,179 insertions during 21,909 observed "woman months" of use, Dr. Jack Lippes of the State University of New York at Buffalo said.

Dr. Lippes was frank to admit that some women had side effects, including pain as well as bleeding and expulsion of the loop from the uterus. But in most cases the effects are not serious.

Moreover, he told the conference on fertility control, held in Buffalo, N.Y., that before Nov. 30, 1964, 32 of the women had discontinued use of the coil because they wanted a child. All but three of them have become pregnant, more than half within three months.

No abortions have resulted from the pregnancies, and studies of 16 children showed no abnormalities.

The conference was sponsored by the Department of Graduate Medical Education as well as the School of Medicine at the university, and the program is acceptable for 14 accredited hours by the American Academy of General Practice.

Only a few countries, such as the Soviet Union, Canada, Australia, Argentina and South Africa, have the resources to continue to tolerate population growth over one percent per year for more than a few more years, Dr. Raymond Ewell, vice president for research at the university, said.

"India is undoubtedly the most vulnerable country in the world today," Dr. Ewell said.

With a population of nearly 500 million in 1965, more than North America and South America put together, India will increase her population by at least 200 million in the next 15 years if present birth rates continue. "The United States is now sending \$600 million worth of food to India per year, and that is all that is keeping India from starvation today," the researcher pointed out.

Other countries, too, are getting help, but the great American surplus is coming to an end, and with the increasing demands of our own population plus commercial exports, we will reduce our food surplus to zero in only a few more years if existing agricultural policies continue, Dr. Ewell pointed out.

"In the long run, birth control is the only answer," he concluded.

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MEDICINE

Birth Control Pill Probe Like That of All Drugs

➤ A FULL-SCALE REVIEW of the safety of birth control pills, as well as an effort to get an amendment to the new drug laws affecting devices such as the uterine coil, will not bear fruit before next March, an official of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration said.

Although retiring FDA Commissioner George P. Larrick states that there is no proof of harm resulting from oral contraceptives, Dr. Joseph Sadusk, FDA medical director, met with a special committee in closed session to review the situation.

The committee members plan to have another meeting later this year, and again in January. By March, they hope to have something definite to report.

Dr. Frances O. Kelsey, chief of the investigational drug branch of the FDA, told SCIENCE SERVICE, however, that she looked on the investigation as no different from the investigation of any new drug.

"Contraceptive drugs should not be in a class by themselves," said Dr. Kelsey, who helped keep thalidomide off the U.S. market.

"As for the device law," Dr. Emmet Madigan noted, "the new drug laws put into effect through the efforts of the late Sen. Estes Kefauver and others did not include devices such as the intrauterine coil. A new amendment will be required to make it necessary to prove that such devices are efficient and safe. So far, no new law or amendment has been entered, although some congressmen and congresswomen are interested."

Dr. Louis Lasagna of Johns Hopkins University called attention to the need for a new law to regulate the sale of the coil in a talk at the White House Conference on Health.

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MEDICINE

Analyze Laughing Sickness

➤ "LAUGHING SICKNESS," a fatal brain disease rampant among primitive tribes of New Guinea, is expected to have broad application to a number of very stubborn illnesses, if its cause can ever be found.

So far, laughing sickness or kuru affects only the primitive people of New Guinea's eastern highlands where it is the major cause of death among women and an important cause of death in children.

However, the mysterious disease is thought to have significant relationship to multiple sclerosis, hepatitis, Huntington's chorea, the brain degeneration associated with cancer, and a number of other diseases of the brain and nervous system, reported the Australian News and Information Bureau in New York.

An explanation of kuru would be a major medical advance, the Australian immunologist, Sir Macfarlane Burnet, was quoted as saying.

Sir Macfarlane, 1960 winner of the Nobel Prize, believes that kuru holds "in unprecedentedly concentrated form, a manifestation of some of the most important problems in general medicine." The doctor has not himself made any laboratory experiments. He estimated kuru's importance after a tour of the New Guinea area.

Kuru appears to destroy the brain in stages. First, patients lose coordination; then they cannot stand or sit correctly; finally they have difficulty swallowing and even-

tually choke to death. It takes its common name, laughing sickness, from the slack facial muscles of its victims, who seem to be laughing during one stage of the illness.

A study of families affected by kuru suggests the disease may be caused by some unknown, possibly infectious germ. More important, the study also indicates that kuru may operate on genetically susceptible persons.

But if kuru is a virus or germ, it cannot be found with standard isolation methods. Experimenters working in Australia and this country have been unable to isolate any significant bacteria and no effects, immunity or otherwise, have been observed in animals inoculated with test material.

However, Sir Macfarlane suggested the possibility that the kuru virus, if there is one, might resemble hepatitis viruses.

A number of other theories have been proposed to explain the disease. One is the "scrapie" theory. Scrapie is a genetically determined sheep disease with close similarity to kuru. If the two are the same, it implies kuru is caused not by a virus but by an infectious molecule of nucleic acid. The diseased molecule would have the characteristics of a virus.

No evidence supports the theory, he said, but it could account for the "progressive and ultimately lethal damage to the cerebellar system that is characteristic of kuru."

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PUBLIC HEALTH

Number of Rats in U.S. Equals Number of People

➤ THE RATS may be winning the rat race in the United States. Their population, still increasing, now equals that of humans.

Still worse, even though cities have recently staged intensive campaigns to eradicate the pests, rats continue to hold their own and infest human habitations.

Overcrowding in large urban areas, especially in the slums, has helped increase the rat population, according to Dr. Ralph E. Heal of the National Pest Control Association, Elizabeth, N.J.

Rats may be developing resistance to pesticides, including the number one rat killer, warfarin, he reported. Rats in Scotland and Denmark now seem to be resisting the rat-poisoner warfarin.

So far, no rats have been reported resisting this chemical in the United States, but people should be on the lookout for any incident of such resistance.

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