

MEDICINE

New Birth Control Pill Cleared for Prescription

► A NEW BIRTH CONTROL pill called Ortho-Novum, cleared by the Food and Drug Administration, is now available for physicians' prescription after five years of testing.

Fewer side effects than in the older birth control drug have been reported, Dr. G. Arnold Cronk, director of clinical research for Ortho Pharmaceutical Corporation in Raritan, N. J., told SCIENCE SERVICE.

Only one woman among 1,377 tested at medical centers in Los Angeles, San Antonio and Mexico City became pregnant, Dr. Cronk said, and the occurrence of nausea and vomiting was 10 to 15 times greater among women who took the older drug. The new drug is to be taken for 20 days each month, beginning on the fifth day after menstruation starts.

Ortho-Novum is a combination of 10 milligrams of norethindrone, a synthetic progesterone, a female hormone secreted in the ovaries, and 0.06 milligrams of mestranol, a synthetic estrogen, another female hormone. The difference in the old and new birth control drugs relates to the ratio of the two female hormones.

The progestin (trade-mark for progesterone) in Ortho-Novum is 17-alpha-ethynyl-17-hydroxy-4-estren-3-one. Norethynodrel, the progestin in the older drug, is 17-alpha-ethynyl-17-hydroxy-5 (10)-estren-3-one. The ratio of progestin to estrogen is 1,000 to 6 in Ortho-Novum, contrasted to 985 to 15 in the older drug.

Although no causal relationship has been shown between Ortho-Novum and blood clotting ailments such as thrombophlebitis, physicians are warned to consider carefully the advisability of prescribing it for women with histories of blood-clotting disease, kidney or heart conditions.

Dr. Cronk said that although Ortho-Novum may not be the ideal contraceptive, it is the best yet to be developed.

• Science News Letter, 83:111 February 16, 1963

MEDICINE

Ancient Egyptians Used Opium Like Aspirin

► OPIUM was the aspirin of ancient Egypt.

Eating a small amount of opium was popular as a cure for diseases, a sedative for pains from wounds, and a pacifier for crying children.

This new description of the uses of opium in Bronze Age Egypt by R. S. Merrillees, research student at University College, London, is reported in *Antiquity*, 36: 287, 1962.

The supposed health-giving properties of opium were so well known that the ancient Egyptians wore good-luck charms shaped like the opium poppy.

The little pottery jugs which some archaeologists believe were made especially to hold the opium poppy capsule may have been imported to Egypt from the Mediterranean island of Cyprus.

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MEDICINE

Hormone-like Substance May Cause Birth Defects

► AN EXCESS of a certain hormone-like substance during pregnancy may contribute to birth defects.

This clue was reported from the center for the health sciences at the University of California, Los Angeles, by Drs. Forrest H. Adams, Veho Reddy and Catherine Baird. They described experiments with the substance, serotonin, a hormone-like compound normally found in blood.

Large doses of serotonin injected in experimental animals during pregnancy resulted in interruption of the pregnancy. Among those animals receiving lower doses, skull, brain, eye and other defects of offspring were noted at birth. Some abnormalities of the heart of offspring were observed, but they were mild.

A number of substances injected in experimental animals during pregnancy will produce defects in offspring at birth, the scientists said. However, they cited a clinical case that lends further support to the implication of excess serotonin in congenital defects.

A certain slow-growing tumor known as a carcinoid has been shown to produce excess amounts of serotonin. A patient at the UCLA Medical Center had a normal child prior to development of a carcinoid tumor.

Following development of the tumor she gave birth to three children, all of whom died just after birth. Apparently congenital defects were involved.

Thus it appears possible that carcinoid tumors or other factors during pregnancy that cause excessive production of serotonin may contribute to congenital defects.

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The *prairie dog* has been found to be the first animal, other than man, to develop both gallstones and atherosclerosis.

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