

## **Without feminism, it would have been just another contraceptive.**

Fifty years ago, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved the oral contraceptive. As we mark that momentous anniversary, women have much to celebrate. The Pill changed the lives of millions of women and became one of the most successful pharmaceutical products of all time.

Yet it might not have happened. In the 1950s, no institutions were willing to fund research on contraceptives. Pharmaceutical companies would not touch it, afraid of a boycott by the powerful Catholic Church. The U.S. government also shunned the project. President Eisenhower insisted that birth control was disreputable and not the business of the government (he later changed his mind). No agencies provided support—not the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation or any research foundations.

But two feminists, birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger and longtime women's rights activist Katharine McCormick, teamed up to realize their dream of a contraceptive that would be completely controlled by women. Sanger had extensive knowledge and contacts through her years of leadership in the birth control movement. McCormick, one of the first women to graduate from MIT and a wealthy widow, had the scientific knowledge and the money. Together they found the scientists and provided the funding for the project.

As soon as the Pill was approved, millions of women wanted it. Doctors accustomed to telling their patients what to do were surprised when women demanded prescriptions, challenging the power relationships between women and their physicians. Intimate personal relationships also changed because women could take the Pill without the approval, participation or even the knowledge of their sexual partners.

The timing could not have been better. The feminist movement gained momentum just as the Pill became available. With the ability to control their fertility, women could take full advantage of new opportunities for education, careers and participation in public life. For the first time, they had effective means to delay or space their children, making it possible to combine family life with a career.

The Pill was not only a tool for women to control their individual lives; it also propelled them to challenge large public institutions. Catholic women defied the church's ban on contraception, weakening the authority of church leaders. Within a few short years, Catholic women were taking the Pill at the same rate as non-Catholic women. Activists in the women's health movement insisted that policymakers require pharmaceutical companies to provide information about side effects and risks in each packet of pills so that women could make considered decisions about their health. They pushed for new laws and court chal-

lenges to remove barriers so that both married and unmarried women could have access to contraception.

In the international arena, experts from the U.S. predicted that oral contraceptives would address growing concerns about rapid population growth and could be key to alleviating poverty, suffering and social unrest in the developing world. Under President John F. Kennedy, birth control became a part of foreign aid. But it was not until women in the developing world achieved access to education and empowerment in their families and communities that they were truly able to control their fertility. Access to contraceptives was essential, but it was not the first step.

Within the United States as well as across the globe, the Pill played an important role in women's emancipation. But none of this could have happened without the feminist movement. Without women's empowerment, the Pill would have been just one more contraceptive—more effective and convenient, but not revolutionary. Thanks to feminism, the Pill enabled women not only to control their fertility but to change their lives.

— ELAINE TYLER MAY

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