

Reflections on the 50th Anniversary of the Birth Control Pill

By Katharine Sheehan, M.D.

This month marks the 50th anniversary of the approval of the birth control pill by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in 1960. As even golden anniversaries go, this is a big one. The pill literally changed everything for women. This anniversary should both stir memories of changes big and small and spark action to ensure that every woman who wishes to do so, benefits from the pill and other forms of birth control.

“The pill,” as it quickly came to be known, was more than just a pill — it was a pathway for women to seek higher education, enter the work force and to plan the timing and spacing of their children. The percentage of unplanned pregnancies declined, despite the fact that too many still occur. And as access to contraception has increased, the rate of abortion has decreased.

My Planned Parenthood colleagues and I all know many women who are successfully balancing both a family and a satisfying career, and this fact is likely attributable to their ability to decide the right time to have children. It would be easy for someone who did not witness the changes experienced by American women and families in the decades following the approval of the pill to take for granted that women are now able to have both families *and* careers.

But as we celebrate the pill’s golden anniversary, we must remember that many women

in the U.S. still do not have access to affordable, effective birth control. In America in 2010, half of all pregnancies are still unplanned, and the rate is highest among teens. Ensuring access to affordable contraception is one of the most crucial investments we can make for women, so they can realize their hopes for themselves and their families when it comes to family life, career, education and so much more.

It is essential that affordable contraception finally be available to every woman, regardless of what kind of insurance she has or her ability to pay. Fortunately, the recently passed federal health care reform law allows us to accomplish this, so long as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services covers quality contraception as part of the law’s expansion of preventive care.

For those who remember what it was like before the pill was approved, this is an anniversary that inspires rededication to a simple goal — helping women plan their family lives. Our daughters, sisters, coworkers and friends need us to not simply be satisfied with the progress we have made over the past 50 years. They need us to engage them in the effort to bring affordable contraception to all women — so that they, in turn, can help make the 100th anniversary of the pill even more momentous.

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