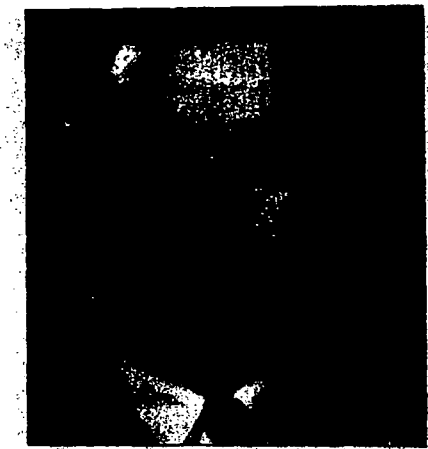
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Oral Contraceptives and Cancer

The Editor Interviews:

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Editor: *There are about 10 million American women and 50 million women world-wide who now take oral contraceptives. In the 18 years since the Pill was first marketed, more and more has become known about its potential health hazards, and fear has arisen about a possible link to cancer. Is there any convincing evidence that oral contraceptives are associated with breast cancer, for example?*

Dr. Kretzschmar: No, there isn't. There is no evidence that the Pill increases the risk of breast cancer and in fact, it has been shown that oral contraceptives may offer some protection against benign breast disease. For example, when Vessey and his group compared 345 women admitted to London teaching hospitals with breast lumps (90 malignant and 255 benign) against a matched control group admitted for acute medical or surgical conditions, it was found that oral contraceptives were in no way related to the risk of breast cancer. It was discovered that the risk of admission to a hospital for a breast biopsy among Pill-users was reduced by about 75 percent, compared to those women who had never used the Pill at all.

The Boston Collaborative Drug Surveillance Program did another retrospective study, and had similar findings. One hundred twenty-one patients with breast disease (cancer, fibrocystic disease, fibroadenoma and miscellaneous problems such as fibrolipoma or benign duct ectasia) were compared to 842 patient controls. Among the women with newly diagnosed breast cancer, three of 23 (13 percent) had received oral contraceptives, compared to 20 percent who had received oral contraceptives among the controls. Of the patients with benign breast tumors, six percent had received oral contraceptives, compared to the 20 percent among the controls. When these findings were analyzed for the patients' ages, it was revealed that at each age level, Pill usage was less common in those with benign breast tumors. According to their data, hospital admissions in the Boston area for breast diagnosis were reduced by almost half for those women using oral contraceptives.

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The prospective study being done by the Royal College of General Practitioners in Great Britain has also ruled out an association between breast cancer and oral contraception. Their 1974 interim report showed that of 46,000 women — 50 percent using the Pill continuously, and 50 percent not — 11 cases of malignant neoplasm of the breast were found in Pill-takers, four cases in ex-takers, and 16 among the non-taking control group. A lower incidence of benign breast neoplasm became apparent after two years of continual Pill usage.

Editor: *Aside from causing cancer* de novo, *is there any evidence that the Pill might exacerbate existing tumors?*

Dr. Kretzschmar: As far as the belief that women with benign breast tumors have a higher risk of developing breast cancer, the apparent protective effect of oral contraceptives against benign breast tumors could be considered a protection against subsequent development of breast malignancy as well. Also, prolonged use of oral contraceptives simulates pregnancy in some ways, and we know that, relative to other women, those who become pregnant early in life are at a lower risk of developing breast cancer.

There is some evidence that women who have fibroids may have enlargement of their fibroids related to the Pill. Of course, women with a strong family history of breast cancer should be followed with caution, and should have careful breast examinations at frequent intervals; women with known or suspected carcinoma of the breast should choose another form of contraception. But I am quite convinced that oral contraceptive intake is in no way responsible for breast carcinoma, *de novo* or otherwise.

Editor: *Have oral contraceptives been linked to ovarian cancer?*

Dr. Kretzschmar: No. There is no relationship. If anything, the Pill has an inhibitory effect on the development of ovarian cancer. In the British study of 46,000 women, there have been fewer deaths from both breast and ovarian cancer among those women using the Pill than among those who did not.

Editor: *Is there a relationship between the Pill and uterine cervical cancer?*

Dr. Kretzschmar: No. Among women receiving estrogen from a combination-type oral contraceptive, no convincing relationship to cancer of the uterine cervix has been established. In a case-control study done at the State University of New York-Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn between 1969 and 1975, 689 consecutive patients with cervical carcinoma were interviewed and compared with a control group of 1,300 with normal cervical smears. Each case subject was matched with a control subject for age, ethnic origin, age at first coitus, age at first pregnancy, and socioeconomic status. The findings: no significant

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