

# Fifty years of the Pill



The 50th anniversary of the contraceptive pill was recently celebrated, somewhat ironically, in Dublin, writes **Joanne McCarthy**

THE 50th anniversary of the contraceptive Pill was celebrated at a ceremony in Dublin recently. The ceremony, which was officiated by RTE broadcaster Miriam O'Callaghan, reflected on the huge changes in Irish society in recent years, which were brought about in no small part by the introduction of what is now universally known as 'the Pill'.

The Pill was first introduced in the US in May 1960, when it was licensed only for menstrual disorders. In 1966, contraception became legal in the States for married women, and by the 1970s it was in wide usage. However, it was some time before the pill, or any other form of contraception, was permitted in Catholic Ireland. Imports and sales of contraceptives had been expressly banned since 1935, and any infringements of the law incurred stiff penalties.

In 1971, a group of women calling themselves the Irish Women's Liberation Movement published a booklet called *Chains or Change*, which called for equal pay, an end to the marriage bar, equal rights in law, justice for widows, deserted wives and unmarried mothers, equal educational opportunities and contraception. They famously travelled to Belfast and back on the 'contraceptive train', returning gleefully waving various birth control devices, then legal in the North, at the

mortified custom officials. It was some time before the law would change, but a powerful statement had been made.

Two years later, the judgment of the landmark McGee case meant that while contraceptives were still not permitted to be sold in Ireland, they could be brought in from other countries. Furthermore, for the next several years, family planning clinics could legally give out contraceptives, but not sell them. At the same time, doctors could give prescriptions for the Pill as long as it was only used to regulate menstruation. In 1978, the Irish Family Planning Act allowed the provision of contraceptives under prescription, and finally in 1985, condoms and spermicides could be sold without prescription.

In spite of the developments, the Catholic Church remained, and indeed still remain, vehemently opposed to contraception.

Fifty years after the first oral contraceptive pill emerged, it continues to be perfected and tailored to suit the needs of the individual. It is linked to a decreased risk of ovarian and endometrial cancer, and can treat acne and polycystic ovarian syndrome. In fact, a recent study of 46,000 women, some of whom had been followed for 40 years, found that women on the Pill were less —likely to die of any cause than those not on the Pill.

## Radical social change

The introduction of the contraceptive pill was a scientific innovation that resulted in huge social change around the world. It is widely credited as having been a major factor in advancing the role of women in society, giving women the freedom to take control of their fertility, plan their families and maintain careers.

The Pill is now used by some 80 million women around the world, and while the majority of users live in the US, Europe and Australia, its uptake is on the increase elsewhere. Cultural and religious attitudes to the Pill vary significantly throughout the world and deeply affect its uptake, however. The Catholic Church accepts only natural family planning methods, and while Protestants are generally more lenient, some sections remain as staunch as Catholicism. In Islam, contraceptives are allowed if they do not threaten health, although their use is discouraged by some. Hindus and Buddhists generally believe that both natural and artificial contraceptive use is ethically acceptable.

In spite of its strong Catholic background, the full impact of the pill has been felt in Ireland. In the last few decades there has been a huge increase in the number of women in the workforce, arguably as a direct result of reproductive freedom, and women now dominate certain sectors,

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such as healthcare and education. In 1961, there were 277,999 women in employment in Ireland, just 14% of whom were married. Five decades later, this has increased by almost 200%, with almost 900,000 women in the workforce in 2006.

There has also been a huge increase in female participation in third-level education, with women now outnumbering men in third-level institutions.

Studies have revealed how sexually liberated the Irish have become in recent years. We are now among the most promiscuous in Europe, with a lifetime average of 8.2 sexual partners, behind only Finland. Irish men top the league with Switzerland for one night stands, with 64% having had one. However, the Irish are older than most of their European counterparts when they start having sex, with the average age at 18.2 years.

### **Changing history**

Speaking at the 50th Anniversary of the Pill celebration, GP and *Health of the Nation* presenter Dr Nina Byrnes told of how the Pill changed the course of history, as women gained control of their fertility.

"This was a scientific innovation with major social impact. It created significant opportunity for women, as women could now postpone having a family and go on to further education.

"There is no other medicine you can simply call 'the Pill'. It is very accessible, relatively cheap, and prescribed every day for healthy women around the world. In fact, it is the most studied medicine of all time and the first medicine designed for healthy women," she said.

Dr Byrnes gave an interesting insight into the history of contraception, which, she explained, dates back to 4,000 BC, when the Greeks and Romans used the not-altogether-foolproof method of olive oil to prevent women from conceiving. From the 16th century, various forms of 'coverings', made of linen, sheep intestines and bladders and even fine leather were used throughout Europe. Until the late 19th century, when scientists finally thought to 'look at the woman's body', all methods involved prohibiting sperm from reaching the egg, Dr Byrnes explained.

Prof Diarmaid Ferriter, professor of modern Irish history at UCD, also spoke at the ceremony of the profound social change brought about by the introduction of the Pill to Ireland, and its consequences for the Irish workforce.

"While there has there been a huge increase in women finishing education, completing third level, entering the workforce, politics, journalism and so on, there is in a sense still a long way to go. Women are still hugely under-represented across many of the power structures in society and the advances seen in recent decades present new challenges," Prof Ferriter said.

"The difference that the Pill made psychologically was incalculable. It disturbed people's comfort zones and entire mindsets. In the late 60s and early 70s, women were being discriminated in a whole host of areas. We have come a long way, but we have a lot more to do. Only 14% of the Dáil is made up of women, compared to more than half of the Spanish parliament. Since the Dáil began, in fact, over 4,000 men have been elected, compared to just 219 women," he said.

"The unfortunate truth is that my daughters are growing up in an Ireland where we still do not have true and genuine equality between the sexes."

One wonders the extent to which that might change over the next 50 years.