

1961

(Mann, B., 2016)

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Cloister Café

A café with quiet

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How the oral contraceptive changed women's lives

Britt Mann · 13:24, May 13 2016

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Happy birthday to The Pill.

The pill which gave millions of women the freedom to choose their own destinies turned 56 this week.

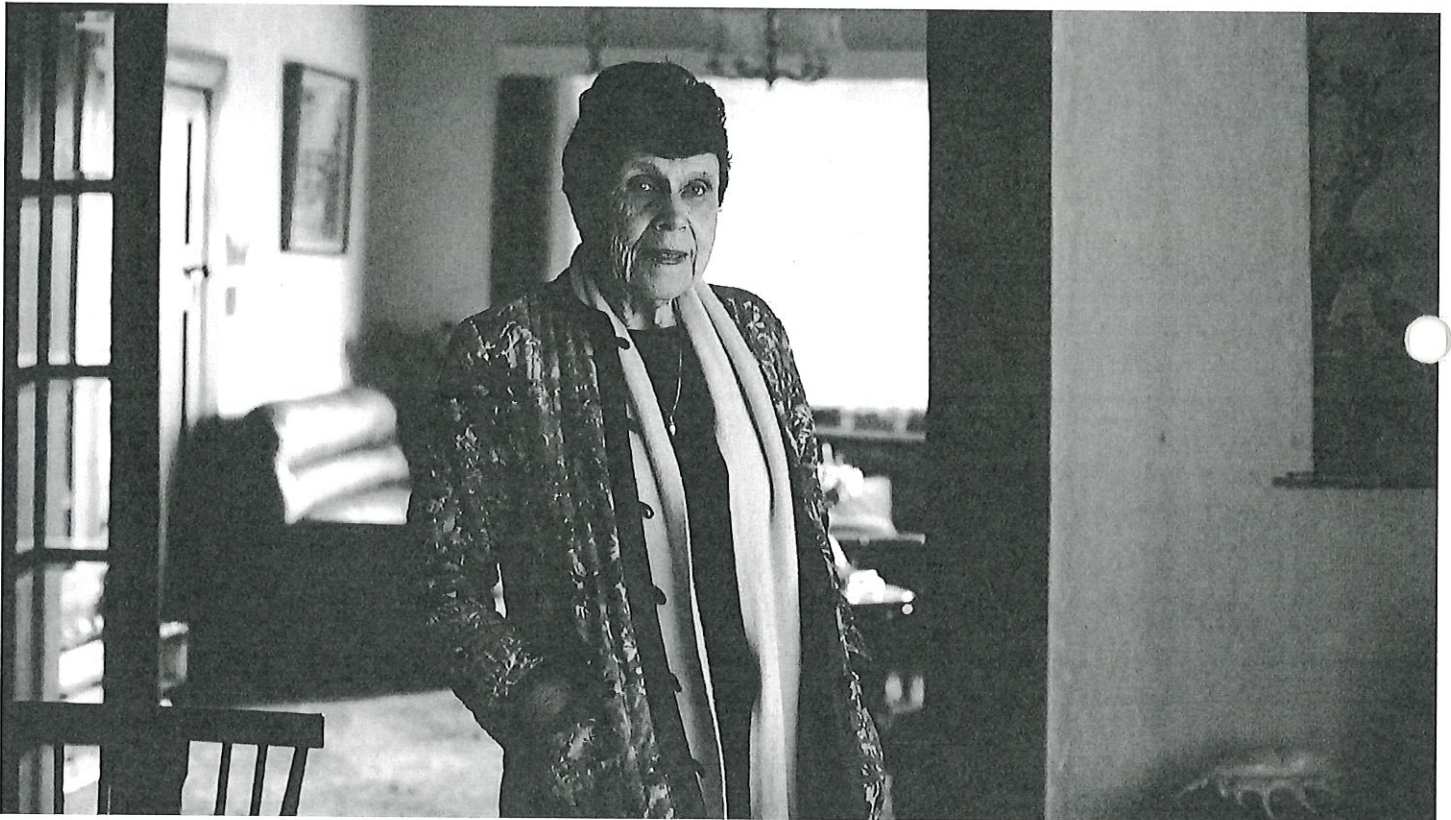
To mark the occasion, we asked female social commentators how the oral contraceptive changed women's lives.

Dame Margaret Sparrow is a pioneer and champion of women's reproductive rights in New Zealand. She was one of the first doctors to provide the contraceptive.

would have been very different - I certainly wouldn't have finished my medical degree.

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DAVID WHITE/FAIRFAX NZ

Dame Margaret Sparrow is a sexual health pioneer who continues to advocate for reproductive rights.

"It came at just the right time for me in 1961, I was one of the first in New Zealand to take it because my husband was a medical student and he brought home some free samples.

"I was the ideal candidate because I was young and I was healthy and I already had two children. So even if I'd gone to a doctor I think I would have probably qualified although it was not easy to get the pill in the early days.

"I was really delighted when the curators at Te Papa put together an exhibition on contraception using my collection [of medications], it's not there now, but they did a lovely tribute to The Pill.

Rosemary McLeod is an author, journalist, columnist and cartoonist. She has been an authoritative voice in New Zealand media for more than 30 years.



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Rosemary McLeod's columns are syndicated in newspapers throughout New Zealand

"Before The Pill there was coitus interruptus, condoms, diaphragms and anxiety.

"They didn't work. One school friend 'had to get married' at 16; other friends 'had to' at 17. What madness. Doctors balked at prescribing the pill for unmarried women and girls, but in Wellington there was anti-establishment Dr Erich Geiringer, who was less paternalistic.

"The pill changed everything for women. If we could control our fertility we could have careers; demand equal rights in employment; limit family size; have sex without fear of pregnancy; demand safe, legal abortions; join the power structure.

"The women's movement that swiftly evolved from this new freedom was a catalyst for today's gender politics. Inevitably it turned the old model of the family on its head."

Beck Eleven is a freelance writer, columnist, and proud cat lady living in Christchurch. A "mini-feminist with training wings", she's written and spoken on the topic.



Beck Eleven's social commentaries appear in The Press on Saturdays.

"Ah, The Pill! Before I tried condoms, femidoms or IUDs, I tried The Pill.

"I was a cautious girl, I wanted sexual freedom and peace of mind in one tiny snack a day. All I had to do was remember to pop one each morning and hide the blister pack from my mother.

"I'm 43 now but I remember plucking up the courage at age 16 to enter a Family Planning clinic in Christchurch. It was terrifying. Everything was terrifying at 16, especially sex. Actually, on reflection, I was more afraid of the thought of having to tell Mum I was pregnant.

"It felt grown up and liberating. I put on weight, I felt revolting. The sex was terrible, painful and fumbling - enough to put me off for a couple of years after that.

"But I had The Pill and I never had to have that conversation with my mother."



SUPPLIED

Danielle Moreau argued in her 1997 thesis that the Pill allowed women to frame their reproductive lives within the discourse of choice.

Danielle Moreau authored *Living with the Pill: Oral Contraceptive Use in New Zealand, 1960–1975*. Today she is a contributor to *The Spinoff*, a *Coronation Street* blogger, and a subject librarian. She lives in Auckland.

"I think one of the most long-lasting effects of the oral contraceptive is something we might not initially think about: its influence on the women's health movement in western societies. The pill was only tested in a very limited way before women started using it en masse, and the first doses were very high. There were a lot of side effects and even some deaths.

"So these issues of inadequate medical testing on women's bodies, and women not being as informed as they might be about reproductive health, combined with other health issues and the burgeoning feminist movement to create a more specific women's health movement that undermined medical paternalism and allowed women to be more informed and in control of their health in general, not just their fertility. [However], we still have a long way to go."

^ Today, emergency contraceptives or morning after pills can be obtained over the counter at the pharmacy. In Nelson and Marlborough, they're free.

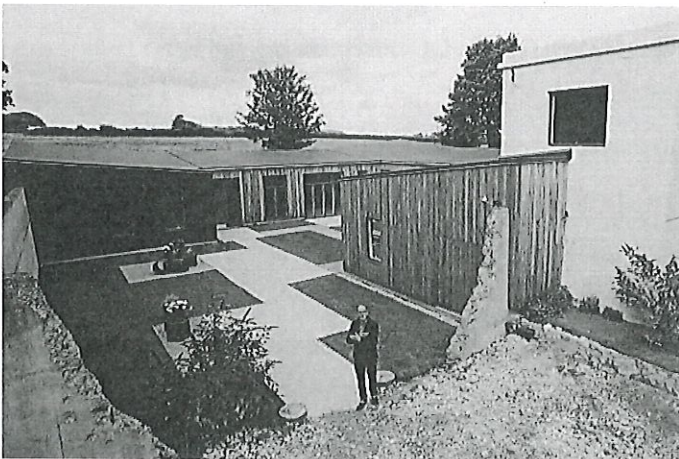
* Earlier this year, the Medicines Classification Committee has recommended selected oral contraceptives be reclassified as restricted, rather than as prescription medicine, meaning pharmacists could dispense birth control pills to women who had received a doctor's prescription anytime within the last three years.

Stuff

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Which is your preferred method of contraception?

None

Condoms

The combined pill

The mini pill

The Jadelle implant

IUD

Morning-after pill

WPESTER

PILL FACTS

- * The oral contraceptive was first prescribed in New Zealand in 1961, having been endorsed by the United States Food & Drug Administration the previous year.
- * The drug, Anovlar, combined synthetic progesterone and oestrogen hormones in a tablet to stop ovulation, with a week of "sugar pills" in each month's blister pack to catalyse menstruation.
- * Globally, the pill helped spark the "sexual revolution", a term denoting women's changing role in society from one of subservience to one of self-determination.
- * Te Ara reports Kiwi women began using the pill at a faster rate than women in other Western countries, though its use was largely restricted to married women.
- * Despite an upswing in teen pregnancies around 1970, eight years later the overall birth rate had fallen below the previous all-time low of the 1930s economic depression.