

Letter to the Editor

SIR,

There are certain points in the paper of Prof. F. de Waard [1] on which I would like to comment.

The claim that we have learned a great deal from studying the epidemiology of breast cancer does not seem fully justified if a cessation in the search for new risk factors is being proposed.

His review of reproductive factors related to breast cancer omits two important ones: contraceptive practices and the marital status of women. A passing reference to the pill in the conclusion to the paper is hardly a substitute for an evaluation of the issue, or discussion of the possible health effects on women of this and other contraceptive methods. A number of studies have disputed the conclusion of a protective effect of early age at first birth as an independent factor in breast cancer [2-5]. Certain results indicate that the highest risk of developing breast cancer is to be found in women of early age at first birth who limit their marital fertility by the means of a specific contraceptive method, the condom. The risk of developing breast cancer in such women has been shown to be more than 12 times greater than in married women with the same characteristics—early age at first birth and one full

pregnancy only—who use other contraceptive techniques (diaphragm, pill, IUD, tubal ligation) [5]. After the pill, the condom (prophylactic, sheath) is nowadays the most widely used contraceptive method in certain developed Western countries [6, 7].

Since it would be fair to assume that many couples will probably continue to be motivated to practice fertility control to achieve their desired small family size, the practical application of the preventive potential against breast cancer is obvious (at least for the U.S. and U.K., and some other developed nations) with the elimination of this type of barrier contraception in marital relations.

Therefore I believe that there is still a need to search for risk factors in the causation of breast cancer, and that the proposal to limit the scope of further investigation in this regard is premature.

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