

# The birth of contraception

## Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance

by John M. Riddle

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### Michel Raymond

The contraceptive pill — what a wonderful invention! At last, we could have a fulfilling sex life, free from worry about the mischief wreaked by uncontrollable gametes, and could separate the desires for pleasure and reproduction. Let's spare a thought for our poor ancestors, who were faced with the choice of reproducing like rabbits or miserably limiting their sex lives. We've made real progress since then.

Or at least that's what people thought when science delivered modern contraception in the twentieth century. For some reason, this myth — and it is one — still holds, 14 years after the publication of John Riddle's book *Contraception and Abortion from the Ancient World to the Renaissance*.

Birth control, by contraception and abortion, has a long history. In the ancient world there were precise recipes, as we know from books written by the doctors of the time (Soranus, Dioscorides and Hippocrates). These doctors obtained their knowledge from direct contact with ordinary people. One plant in particular was said to be a contraceptive — a giant fennel, *Ferula historica* — and was so sought after and harvested in such quantities that it became extinct.

In the Middle Ages, when the first medical schools [ok?] were founded, knowledge began to be passed from doctors to their pupils, the next generation of doctors.

[ok?] Contraception was conspicuous by its absence in these courses for men, and such knowledge was lost among doctors. However, it was still transmitted between women, at least while the traditional way of life continued.

I visited an old alpine village this year that had continued to use traditional agricultural practices until about 20 years ago. An old peasant of 92 told me about a plant with potent contraceptive properties — knowledge that she obtained from her grandmother, who must have learnt about it from her family. The plant concerned was a kind of juniper, and the berries were used. According to Riddle's book, juniper (which has 23 entries in the index) has been used in contraceptive recipes since ancient times. The common name of one species of juniper, the savin (*Juniperus sabina*), was derived from its ability to save young women from

shame, and modern science has finally confirmed its contraceptive effects. Many of the plants mentioned in old books have had their contraceptive properties confirmed — most of them contain oestrogen.

This traditional knowledge, traces of which remain in the memories of some Europeans, started to disappear with depopulation of the countryside in the nineteenth century: in towns, ancient knowledge ceased to be transmitted. Probably for the first time since the Greco-Roman era (at least), most Western women no longer had access to an effective means of contraception. The contribution of modern medicine, culminating in the pill, therefore constituted real progress, but it must be seen in the context of history.

Riddle shows us that ancient contraceptive medical practices were safe, effective and commonly used. Sociological studies on their use remain to be carried out. But it is possible that, between the Middle Ages and the rise of modern contraception, the well-off and city dwellers have had little access to effective contraception, thanks to the growth of conventional medicine and the soaring social power of the physician.

This is just one of the many intriguing lines of investigation to arise from this book, which shines a different light on what we are generally taught about the 'progress' of the modern world.

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