

## BIRTH CONTROL.

SIR,—The issue raised by Dr. Mary Scharlieb, in her letter appearing in your issue of July 16th, is so vitally important that I feel it must not go unanswered, especially in view of the weight rightly attaching to anything uttered by one who has attained to so distinguished a position in the profession as she has done.

Mrs. Scharlieb admits that "on the surface of things it would seem as if a knowledge of how to prevent the too rapid increase of a family would be a boon to over-prolific and heavily burdened mothers," but she thinks that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages.

The first disadvantage, in her opinion, is that the artificial limitation of the family causes damage to the woman's nervous system. This, of course, is a practical point of the utmost importance, and raises the whole question of the injuriousness or otherwise of contraceptive methods, assuming that the best methods are selected, and that they are properly used. I am aware that some opponents of birth control have alleged that all sorts of physical ills follow the use of contraceptives, including uterine carcinoma, fibroids, ovarian disease, insanity, etc. The difficulty is to distinguish between *post hoc* and *propter hoc*. The use of contraceptives has become so common amongst the educated classes that it must be very easy to find numerous instances where the victims of any of these ills will admit to having used contraceptives at some period of their lives. On the other hand, other recognized authorities have failed to trace any real connexion. Thus, Sir Francis Champneys, who is not at all an advocate of birth control, and not likely to be biased in favour of contraceptives, when giving evidence on the question before the Birth Rate Commission, said: "I do not think it is true to say that in the majority of cases prevention does affect health in a deleterious manner." Questioned as to the use of soluble pessaries, he replied: "I believe the common ingredient is quinine, and I do not believe that does any harm whatever." Dr. Hector Treub, professor of gynaecology at the University of Amsterdam, in his handbook of gynaecology (fourth edition, 1903), after describing several of the methods of preventing conception as harmless, says: "And the fact in itself that pregnancy is prevented cannot be said to be a source of danger." Professor Forel, a recognized authority on sex, writes:

"We must no longer be content to remain indifferent and idle witnesses of the senseless and unthinking procreation of countless wretched children, whose parents are diseased and vicious. . . . We must, therefore, recommend to all persons who are sickly or infirm in body or mind, and especially to all suffering from hereditary ailments, the use of means for the prevention and regulation of conception. . . . We refer, of course, to such preventive methods as are completely harmless to the persons making use of them."

A few years ago, in order to ascertain what was the prevailing opinion of the medical profession in this country as to the injuriousness or otherwise of contraceptives, I issued a questionnaire to 100 medical practitioners, including a number of women doctors, selected quite impartially. The great majority of the replies were to the effect that the two forms of contraceptives which I specifically mentioned were not injurious. I will quote two replies as a set-off against Dr. Scharlieb's opinion. The first was from a woman, the second from a man.

1. "In nearly thirty years of practice among women, of which nearly twenty years have included experience on the staff of a women's hospital, I have not met a single case in which I could trace ill health to this cause. Naturally, both forms of practice have involved the receipt of many confidences on the subject."

2. "I am convinced after many years of gynaecological and obstetrical practice that the above practices (the use of contraceptives) are extensively practised among the educated classes. Personally, I have been consulted on several occasions about these methods, whether they have any deleterious effects upon the general health of either the male or the female. In both cases I have always, from practical experience, answered in the negative."

Dr. Scharlieb's second objection is to the effect that she believes that the practice of birth control may cause sterility, so that subsequently the couple, when they want children, are unable to obtain them. Personally, I doubt the validity of this objection. I have been unable to find any satisfactory evidence to justify such a supposition. Of course, sterility being very common, it may often happen that couples who have practised birth control

from their earliest married days only discover the sterility later on when they want children. It is very possible that they will then reproach themselves together with those who advised them. But the obvious way to meet this contingency is to advise all young couples to make sure of some children, if they can, before beginning to practise birth control.

I must also join issue with Dr. Scharlieb in her third objection, that the use of contraceptives increases self-indulgence on the part of the husband. There is no evidence that the father of an unlimited family is any more abstemious than the father of the strictly limited one. In any case, her objection could hardly apply to the use of contraceptives by the husband, which implies an appreciable measure of self-control.

Dr. Scharlieb's fourth objection is that unmarried persons may abuse birth control. Of course, all knowledge may be abused. Is that a sufficient reason for suppressing knowledge, or for censuring those who use it legitimately?

May I say, in conclusion, that no unbiassed observer can doubt that birth control has come to stay. It is eminently desirable, therefore, that the medical profession should study it in all its aspects, and especially in regard to its practical application. In the past this aspect has been sadly neglected. There is room for full and thorough scientific research. I am glad that attention is now beginning to be turned to a subject fraught, as I believe, with great possibilities for good to the whole human race.—I am, etc.,

Leicester, July 17th.

C. KILLICK MILLARD.

SIR,—In her letter of July 1st Mrs. Scharlieb states that in her experience prevention of conception has led to sterility and nervous disease. This is quite at variance with the experience of many who have had good opportunities of judging. Many of my patients have practised prevention of conception successfully for years with nothing but benefit; and when circumstances have allowed, and another child has been desired, conception usually follows intercourse whenever prevention is discontinued. In a case at present under my care the third conception has occurred in a married life of eight years, each conception having been wished for and prevention having been practised between each in order to "space" the family. Such cases prove that prevention does not cause sterility. Mrs. Scharlieb's cases prove nothing—they may have been sterile from other causes.

As regards the alleged nervous diseases, it is not the mother of a limited family who is particularly prone to these at the menopause; it is the worn-out woman who has borne child after child beyond her strength, and the unwilling celibate, who fall victims to their nerves. It is hard to follow Mrs. Scharlieb on the moral issue—surely it is better for a woman habitually immoral to have no child? Would she have the State burdened with more bastards, or would she have the prostitute continue to practise abortion? Surely in a case of this sort prevention is a duty to the race just as it is in the case of physical and mental defectives?

Mrs. Scharlieb does men less than justice when she implies that without the fear of conception they would make their wives slaves to their lust; and she evidently does not realize that in the case of a healthy young couple sexual intercourse only once a year could quite well result in a family of a dozen or more, so that if early marriage is contemplated some form of birth control must be used by practically all but the utterly reckless.

Birth control in any form involves self-control, and Mrs. Scharlieb need not fear that its spread will lead to unbridled sexual passions—these are not prominent characteristics of the professional and educated classes who chiefly use birth control at present.—I am, etc.,

Mancot, Chester, July 17th.

BARBARA G. R. CRAWFORD.

SIR,—The opposition of Dr. Mary Scharlieb to birth control suggests that she does not appreciate the supreme fact of sociology—namely, that the world's food supply has always been increased so slowly that only a small percentage of couples in the world could get sufficient food for more than two or three children. We have to choose between birth control on the one hand, and poverty, high death rates, unrest, war, prostitution, and abortion on the other.—I am, etc.,

Brasted, Kent, July 18th.

BINNIE DUNLOP, M.B., Ch.B.