

On the morning after the night before

There was another Sex Hater's Ball in the House of Lords on January 29. As usual the dancing was led by Baroness Young, on behalf of the Conservative Party. She moved that an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty praying that the Prescription Only Medicines (Human Use) Amendment (No. 3) Order 2000 (S.I. 2000/3231) be annulled. This order changes the law by allowing hormonal emergency contraception (the morning-after pill, known as Levonelle) to be sold by pharmacists to persons over 16 without a doctor's prescription.

For the Government, Lord Hunt explained that the background to the order was an application made by Medimpex UK to the Medicines Control Agency. First, the Agency assessed the safety of the medicine in the light of the legal criteria for prescription-only status. Then the application was referred to the Committee on the Safety of Medicines, which initially reported favourably. The matter was then put out to public and professional consultation. Virtually all the main medical and pharmaceutical bodies which responded were in favour, and did not raise any concerns about the safety of supply in a pharmacy setting. Both the Committee on the Safety of Medicines and the Medicines Commission carefully considered all the evidence submitted. Finally they advised that Levonelle can be supplied safely under the supervision of a pharmacist.

In 1999 800,000 women were prescribed emergency contraception. To be effective Levonelle has to be taken very soon after intercourse, and Lord Hunt said the order would assist this by ending the need to approach a general practitioner for a prescription. The Government had also made the order so as to reduce the level of abortions.

None of this satisfied the noble Lady.

Baroness Young: I have often been accused in the past of being concerned only about boys. That has never been true, but today I am concerned about girls. My concern, as always, is the protection of young people, and 16 year-olds are children in law. I have also said on more than one occasion that all law sends a signal. So what signal does this order send? First, it says that unprotected sex is all right. This is exactly the opposite of what the whole sex education industry has been saying for at least 20 years. It is of course a very dangerous signal because it will increase the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases . . . Secondly, promiscuity will be encouraged. Everyone, including GPs, health authorities and now chemists . . . nurses and youth workers, will be making the morning-after pill available to young girls. One can picture the scene. The boy will say to the girl, "why not? you can take the morning-after pill" The girl will think: "Why not? I could take the morning-after pill and be all right."

Lady Young sought to strengthen this argument by citing the Government's Teenage Pregnancy White Paper, which quoted a boy as saying: "I have used a condom, but I don't like it. It puts you off. What's the use of having sex if you don't enjoy it?"

Many will think the lad had a point, but not the senescent Lord Longford. He said it had been put to him that the morning-after pill reduced the number of teenage pregnancies. He accepted that such pregnancies were "evil", but considered fornication a greater evil still.

The Bishop of St Albans perpetrated the familiar solecism of equating a foetus with a child, complaining that abortion wipes out “villages filled with children week in and week out”. The Bishop of Southwark said sex outside marriage is morally wrong: “[w]e may preach against it, and we do; we may teach against it, and we do; but it goes on happening”. This ignores the hard fact that unmarried persons also need sexual fulfilment. They include the many for whom, for one reason or another, marriage is simply not available.

In support of the order, Lord Young introduced a shameful aspect. “. . . not all parents manage to talk to their children. Indeed, one study showed that one third of girls had not been told about periods before they started.”

A peeress had the answer to this sort of prudish betrayal.

Baroness Walmsley: We could stop talking about sex as if it were some terrible immoral activity that causes untold harm to society and start accepting it as normal human behaviour. We should learn to discuss it with our children openly, frankly and without embarrassment . . . What we should be doing today is saying to the Government, "Well done, keep going, extend the arrangements that make the product free to those for whom cost might be a barrier to getting help."

Their Lordships were persuaded along those lines and Baroness Young’s motion was defeated by 177 votes to 95.

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