

## DEBATE AND EDUCATION

**Birth Control in Antiquity**

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**Abstract**

**The question of birth rate control in Antiquity clashes against problems in the sense that the majority of ancient authors when discussing this matter expressed themselves in a very unclear way; they did not distinguish exactly between contraceptives and abortifacients and sometimes even interchanged them mutually. The ancient Greek doctors studied long and precisely this area of gynaecology and especially Hippocrates and his school contributed a lot to study of abortions and abortifacients.**

**Contraceptive theories and methods proclaimed by Greek and Roman doctors meant a significant progress in development of medical science. The opinions of doctors of Hippocrates group, Sorano of Efes and others, confirm their importance for medical practice by their wide and frequent occurrence in medical writings. Some methods of contraception defended by Greek and Roman doctors were very effective and many pieces of information became basis for modern contraceptive means, others certainly did not achieve the desired effects. Full Text (Free, PDF) [www.bmj.sk](http://www.bmj.sk).**

**Key words: contraception, abortion, contraceptives, abortifacients.**

Perhaps all people in the Antiquity knew both types of birth control – interruption of the existing pregnancy and protection against conception, but it is highly probable that they did not study causality of this phenomenon. If a man pondered over the causes birth control resulted from, so the more imperfect his physiological-biological conceptions were the more naively he explained them to himself.

**Birth Control in Ancient Greece**

Birth control in the ancient Greece was not just a matter of medicine but also that of politics. Many Greek writers, when discussing these problems, expressed their opinions of the optimum number of children in a family. In his epic poems, Homer mentioned the Trojan king Priamos who allegedly had 50 sons and 12 daughters, on the Achaean side Nestor, the king of Pylos, had 6 sons with numerous offsprings. But in contrast to this, Hesiodos, in his “Works and Day”, promoted the family with only one child: “only if father’s property is inherited by a son as the only child, wealth will grow”. Also Aristotle recommended to reduce the number of children, but he did not state it exactly; according to him there should be rather more control in the conception of children than in property, because if the reproduction is given totally free way, it will be the cause of people’s poverty.

Some authors suggested to control birth through the legislation stipulating older age to become parents. In his “Constitution”, Platon stipulated appropriate age for getting married – for a girl 20–30 years, for a man 30–55 years. Aristotle stated older age in women to get married as beneficial and he suggested the age of 18 in women and 37 in men as right for them to get married.

Though literary sources present also contraceptive pills, most of the ancient authors presented abortion as the most frequent way of birth control, which was probably because it functioned as a more palpable proof than prevention in conception.

**What was the moral view of abortion in old Greeks?**

To understand this question better and to find impartial answer, we have to go through our ancestors’ biological and social opinions on fetus before and after birth. Relations between these

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opinions and the problem of abortion are so close that it would not be possible to separate them and judge them apart from each other.

The main source of these opinions are the works of philosophers and physicians. Philosophers of the stoic school did not consider baby before its birth a human being: they considered it merely as *pars viscerum matris*. According to the stoics embryo was not presented with its own life, but is a part of mother's womb from which it will fall out at a proper time in the same way as it is in case of a fruit when it is fully ripe. Similar biological teachings propagated by philosophers could, of course, just support performance of abortions. Other philosophers, whose opinions aroused the greatest acceptance, went even further in such teachings. Platon and Aristotle recommended to make abortion even if it was not medically inevitable because they did not consider fetus a human being.

Platon was against his state to have more than 5040 settlements. To keep the balance he recommended to cut the number of deliveries and to leave babies (foundlings). For his ideal state Platon required compulsory abortion in each woman who conceived after the age of 40 years.

To leave sickly babies was considered normal by Aristotle; he asked to stipulate the number of deliveries by law, those above this number had to be got rid of by abortion before the moment a fetus started to show signs of life. But what was and what was not permitted depended on such judgement of life.

#### **What was the attitude of Old Greek legislature to abortions**

There are different responses to this question. In the journal *Janus*, author of the study on abortion in the ancient Greece summarizes the views of historians such as those of Meier, Holscher, Westermann, Mayer, who argue that abortion was not punished by laws. Other authors, such as Hermann, say that the law was silently observed, but in practice there was contraversion as to the view whether an embryo is a man and whether it would be possible to impose punishment for murder if embryo was removed.

It is probable that if there had been countries where such act was admitted, Aristotle would not have forgotten to list them to support his reflexions of abortion. Whether it was or was not done with official approval, it is highly probable that abortion was tolerated or even supported and perhaps performed in large extent. Similarly as it was not a long time ago, practice of midwives played an important role in this: "...and whenever they consider proper to remove embryo, they perform abortion".

Following these social and philosophical reflexions concerning the problem of abortion in the ancient Greece, I would like to add medical aspect of this way for birth control. I am going to start with "An Oath of Aesclepiads" in which Hippocrates says: "Nor will I give a woman a pessary to procure abortion". Abortion prohibited by the oath is undoubtedly meant the abortion performed to remove an embryo, probably not a therapeutic abortion which is a common practice in obstetrics in some cases.

Agents which the Old Greek physicians tested and recommended to induce miscarriage/abortion or to prevent conception

were various and numerous. In this connection it is necessary to note that very rarely was there a difference in understanding what was an abortion agent and what was a contraceptive one. Therefore it is difficult also for us today to make any classification in it and I can mention these agents just in the same way as ancient authors did.

In general, they can be divided in mechanical agents and the agents having chemical effects. Abortive agents were known among ancient nations under these names: "ekbolia, fthoria, amblotika" and many others. Greek pharmacology had abundant agents used for abortion. Among the authors who mention them I can refer to the authors cited in Hippocratic oath and Aristotle. These agents were designed to produce uterus contractions and in this way to wash off already dead embryo or to peel off the egg and produce bleeding. There were also substances which induced stopped menstruation. Examples how these agents were applied are rather curious, as show the quotations from Hippocratic oath: "The inside of a pumpkin well crushed in cedar resin is wrapped into a cloth leaving its end bare, then it is inserted as deep as possible; after it is stained with blood it is pulled out".

"To insert a soft stem of cabbage with its end spread with almond oil".

The intrauterus injection as an abortion agent is presented in the collection as follows: "Infusion for the uterus capable to expel an embryo if it is dead: to crush saffron, to pour goose fat over it, to sieve it and pour it into the uterus keeping it there as long as possible".

Guidelines for contraception can be found in Aristotle's work *Historia Animalium*. The author recommends a woman who does not want to get pregnant to lubricate her genitals with cedar oil, white lead or incense before sexual intercourse.

One of the mechanical means for insertion of abortive agents were pessaries. They were known under the name of "prosteta or pessos". They were made from linen, sponge or worsted wool and rolled up into the shape of finger together with various drugs, substances inducing abortion. Pessaries were wound up with a thin thread to be easily pulled out. Others were in the shape of a small egg, nipple or rather a tiny pencil or an acorn.

Substances used to prepare pessaries were wine and honey, wine, rose oil, goose fat, resin, dough, cedar resin, mother milk. Paste (dough), honey were used to prepare paste-like drugs.

Injections or infusions contained various substances added into the melted goose fat or oil.

#### **Birth Control in ancient Rome**

One of the first questions arising when studying this problem is that concerning causes and motives why the Romans tried to limit the size of their families. It is well known that the most important aspect of contraception is its purposeful motivation which is a key to its success. At the same time we can neither ignore such a social factor as that of high standard of living with increasing welfare and hedonism especially attempted for in higher society. For the case of our problem it is perhaps sufficient to refer to what is well known:

- a) laws of the emperor Augustus against debauchery and decadence (low standard of morality) in the year 18 BC, in the 1st and 9th years AD (*lex Iulia de pudicitia et coercendis ordinibus*, *lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus*, *lex Iulia de adulteriis et stupro*);
- b) references to nefarious practices of abortions so numerous in the literature of the first centuries BC and AD;
- c) re-enacting of the Augustus' laws in the 1st and 3rd centuries AD and of similar laws in the middle of the 5th century AD.

From this it may be concluded that these accusations must have had some serious grounds. There is also assumption resulting from it that the number of deliveries was really low. The average number of children in a family was less than 3 children, even though this was the number stipulated in the Augustus' laws.

Further, we can pay attention to how the Roman jurisdiction reacted to this situation. Expelling the embryo was not legally punished during the period of republic, but of course, the censor could reprimand or pater familias could reprove for it. Because this immorality tended to grow in the higher social strata of the Roman society, it probably served as one of stimuli for enacting the above mentioned Augustus' laws of marriage.

There were also attempts to broaden "the *lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficis*" against those who provided agents for abortion. Abortion was then punished as "*crimen extraordinarium*" according to the rescript of Severus and Antonius; such punishment meant a long-term relegation and was based on the right of a man to a not yet born baby. According to such law, only a married or divorced woman who was pregnant could be punished. Abortion could not be considered a murder, because the not-yet-born was not considered a man. Embryo was considered a part of a woman's bowels. It is possible that later, not excluding the impact of this view, such punishment became generalized. Such an action on the side of a woman was for a man legal reason for divorce.

Roman girls were getting married very young. According to the Roman public law, maturity of girls was set 2 years earlier than in boys – in 12 years of age. The girl at this age was therefore called as "*viripotens*", or "*virum patiens*". There were really very young girls among brides and we can read that they were pregnant and were giving birth at 14. The average length of the first marriages was about 18 years. We can suppose that during that time more than three children could be born. Some authors believed that low birth rate in the Romans could be explained by race decline, race mixture, or selected reproduction of the best ones.

Other explanation could be that the Romans avoided to have large families in such a way that they were not faithful to their wives; though infidelity was morally denounced, it was often forgiven and overlooked. But neither occasional infidelity of wives, nor repeated infidelity of husbands can explain the lower number of children in families. Therefore we can admit that the birth control in Romans was achieved through some tools of its regulation.

We can find surprising up-to-date view in the works of *Soranos of Ephes*, the great gynecologist and obstetrician. Soranos, the Greek working in Rome during the reign of the emperors of *Hadrian* and *Trajan*, engaged in nearly all fields of medicine, he gained great reputation especially as an obstetrician and gynecologist. What has remained from his works on women diseases and assistance during labour can just confirm his reputation, even though he owed his predecessors a lot for it. Soranos presented in a well-informed way not only the labour act and care of a newborn, but he mentioned also expulsion of embryo and artificial prevention of conception.

He presented his opinion of abortion in his work on Gynecology describing two prevailing views of taking substances inducing abortion. Some people rejected their taking referring to the Hippocratic Oath stressing that the task of medicine was to preserve and protect works of nature. The others admitted taking abortion substances in case of threat of dangerous labour, too small uterus, or development of neoplasms and fissures/cracks in the isthmus uteri. In the end, Soranos expressed his opinion saying it was better to prevent conception than to kill an embryo.

In his above mentioned work *Gynaikeia* (in lat. *Gynaecia*) he presented his theory of contraception in a partially scientific way, partially not verified, but still not naively magic. "If it is much more comfortable not to get pregnant than to kill embryo, a man has to avoid sexual intercourse during the periods of time suitable for conception".

"To prevent conception it is also helpful to lubricate the mouth of uterus with old oil, honey or cedar resin, or just with balsamy juice or white lead, or with an-ointment made from myrtle oil and white lead, also with alum stick which has to be moistened before coitus, or with galbanum resin mixed with wine. Soft wool inserted into the uterus mouth is also effective, or vaginal suppositories used before coitus which can contract or close it. Because if these agents have contracting and cool effects, they can close the mouth of uterus before the moment of coitus and prevent penetration of sperms into the uterus cavity".

Many of these methods could have been effective as some of them were still used in the last century. Alum stick, vinegar and salt water are highly spermicidal, olive oil and sticky substances, recommended by many authors, can block the uterus mouth and reduce mobility of sperms, thus decreasing possibility of getting pregnant.

In the chapter I, 64, he recommended a woman finding she got pregnant to walk and do sudden movements, let herself shake in a charriot, jump and lift heavy things. Such woman should drink diuretic decoctions, give herself intensive enemas, rub sweet and warm oil in well all over her body, wash herself every day in a sweet not too hot water, stay in a bath a longer time, drink soft wine before having a bath and eat spicy meals together with it. If abortion was not induced in that way, it was necessary to continue with application of ointments made from bean flour mixed with bull bile and with application of similar compresses.

Similar prescription can be found in Plinius the Older. He presents many examples of plants which can be used either as abortion agents or contraceptives. It seems that he himself was

not quite sure about this issue because in the chapter XXIV he presents cedar juice (*succus cedri*) as an abortion agent if used before coitus. We can find many other references to contraceptives with this author, most of them harmful to health, e.g. “*Felicitis duo genera... Neutra danda mulieribus, quoniam gravidis abortum, ceteris strilitatem facit*”.

So medical writings testify to the existence of contraceptive agents. English author M.K. Hopkins in his study “Contraception in the Roman Empire” presents interesting data of their descriptions in the works of old Greek and Roman authors. To provide evidence of the existence of contraception, he went through the works of 22 writers. These works contain general medical texts, books of plants, gynecology, chronic and acute diseases etc. Out of 22 authors eleven of them suggested contraceptive methods, out of these 22 authors 18 suggested agents for abortion, 15 of them providing also the methods how to use them. Abortion agents occur in them very often, more often than contraceptive ones. For example, among the plants presented by Paul of Aegina, 10 of them are abortives, 1 for sterility and 1 of them is a contraceptive; Sextus Placitus offers 6 agents for sterility and 9 for contraception. Dioscorides’ first 2 books include 400 plants and 26 of them as herbs for contraception, 2 for sterility and 9 are contraceptives. In this study M.K. Hopkins came to the conclusion that 11 out of 22 medical writers suggested contraception.

Compendium “Gynecology in Antiquity” of the year 1999 presents as the latest information that during the existence of the Roman Empire about 200 different oral and vaginal abortives were known among people, 90 % of them are considered effective from the contemporary pharmacological point of view.

But the existence of contraception and abortion recipes/prescriptions evokes the question that if these were easily accessible and useable (olive oil, wine, wool), why we have not heard more about their use. Basic problem in this matter was that contraception was mixed up with abortion making no difference between them, so that the same medicines recommended by doctors as contraceptives were considered the agents serving to expel embryo. Unlike this, in our present view there is a clear difference in the meaning of contraception and that of abortion. But historians rather satisfied themselves with the supposition that the Romans thought, understood and acted in all aspects approximately in the same way as they did. The interchange of abortion and contraception presents an example of how our present concepts/notions differ from those of Romans.

One of a few people who made clear distinction between abortion and contraception was Soranos. He used the expres-

sions “*atokion*” to denote the agent preventing conception and “*ffhorion*” for the agent killing an embryo. On the other side, Plinius considered many agents as being both contraceptives and abortives, as it was pointed out in the previous chapter. There is a clear change of contraception for abortion also in the cited chapter XXIV, where we can notice interchange of “*ante*” (before coitus) and “*abortivum*”.

Such mistakes and interchanges in the works of some writers were undoubtedly due to the fact that ancient doctors were not able to determine exactly when pregnancy started, nor were they sure about the gestation period. According to Aulus Gellius, a baby could be born in the 7th, 9th, or 10th months, but not in the 8th one. Disputes of this type could be also found in Aristotle and Hippocrates. Exact calculation of conception was therefore difficult, and confusion of abortives with contraceptives quite obvious.

In Latin there was no abstract word denoting contraception. For abortion there was a word “*abortio*”, for contraception there was a verbal sentence “*ne concipiat; ut non concipiat; inhibeatur conceptio*”. There could be a quite reasonable assumption that such ambiguity in using a simple word in Latin limited its use in the authors describing such practice. But such ambiguity is probably symptomatic in the problems related to contraception. If the Romans found problems related to contraception and abortion it cannot be surprising that they considered difficult to differ contraceptive agents from those inducing abortion.

Abortion is a method of limiting the number of family members, success or failure of this method can be noticed quite soon. Efficiency of contraceptives, in addition to discomfort, care and ceaseless effort of a man and woman, cannot be appreciated immediately. Effort to persuade somebody about the effectiveness of this or that contraception technique was complicated very much with such factors as e.g. probability of conception in various times and frequencies, fertility of a man, fertility of a woman, extent of sterility effects, carefulness in the use of single methods.

It is not by chance that majority of references to the birth-control agents found in medical and other writings were proscribed. The Romans, in the same way as Christians later, considered marriage an institution for bearing children (*liberorum procreandorum causa*). But it was quite obvious that many people did not identify with this ideal; otherwise it would not be necessary for moralists, philosophers and statesmen to criticize those people who had a sexual intercourse without desire to have children. People in classical old ages, regardless of any moral or even legal proscription, limited the size of their own families using contraception or other forms of birth-control.

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