

NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING FOLLOWING HUMANAE VITAE; LOST OPPORTUNITIES

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The fallout from the papal encyclical in the late sixties was considerable especially in Europe. It was one of the reasons why the Catholic Doctors Association in Ireland died out. In the UK it was decided that whilst individual doctors in the then Guild, could freely express their own views, as a Catholic body the Guild would not publicly contradict the Church's teaching. In a way one could say that dissent was privatised.



A further decision was taken to encourage those working on the scientific basis of NFP to carry out their research with added urgency.

Two consultants were working on this in Birmingham, John Kelly and Anna Flynn. Anna was researching the pre ovulation hormonal changes using urine and blood and established that ovulation could be predicted by several days. If ovum survival was added then the total fertile period was about seven days with the greatest fertility following ovulation.

The problem was that it was not always the same seven days in each cycle as the so called "temperature method" had shown and the hormonal tests took time and could only be done in a few laboratories.

There were accompanying mucus changes which could be detected with an increase in cervical mucus and changes in its consistency before and during ovulation which formed the basis of the so called, "mucous method" pioneered by Dr Billings. The Billings method became used all over the world, even in China.

Meanwhile a fast urine test for detecting the pre ovulatory hormonal changes based on Anna's work was developed using a microprocessor and marketed as Persona. It could be used in the home without training and it could also be used to help achieve pregnancy giving women control of their fertility. It was trialled in Birmingham by Anna and John together with colleagues in Dublin and Holland and was judged almost as reliable as the contraceptive pill.

Amongst its advantages was absence of side effects and full control over procreation (the proper term) and could be used in the home as easily as the urine based pregnancy test. In poor countries the Billings method was always available and easily learnt after three cycles and the help of a trained but not necessarily medically qualified woman.

There were also psychological and emotional and personal benefits for couples requiring communication and consideration of each other.

At the time I was Master of the Guild and took the step of informing the bishops of that time that we had a unique group of experts in the Midlands willing to set up an advisory group for them. The answer was a firm "thanks but no thanks".

What a lost opportunity for the faithful that could also have been an example for all.