

# American Indians Long Ago Utilized Contraceptive Methods

From ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN INDIAN PHYSICIANS (Note: The following article is part of the "Family Planning-Clinical Considerations" speech written by Herbert B. Fowler, M.D. and was presented recently to the National Family Planning Forum for Indians in Phoenix, Arizona. Dr. Fowler is a member of the Association of American Indian Physicians.)

By HERBERT B. FOWLER, M.D. History of American Indian Contraceptive Methods. The Indians of the North American continent had various forms for contraceptive birth control, including abortion and infanticide, for centuries before the arrival of the white man. Until about 1908 there was little authenticity on the subject in writing.

It is very interesting to note that only a little over thirty years ago the late Norman Himes wrote that "judging by the paucity of reports, the primitive tribes of North America seemed to have practiced contraception very little." Himes reported the use of some herbs used as oral contraceptives among several tribes and concluded that they were ineffective.

Himes (in his medical text - The History of Contraceptives) finally came to the conclusion that, "American Indians have no effective method of preventing conception." He maintained that they relied mainly on abortion, infanticide, and abstinence to control family size. He also added this statement, "for no drug has yet been discovered which when taken by mouth will induce temporary sterility."

Shortly after Himes made this statement oral contraceptives came into general use. The Indian herbs referred to were eventually subjected to laboratory tests in the search for an effective oral means of controlling fertility. Some of them were found to be very effective and some were not.

Just as America was considered to be undiscovered, before the white man "found" it, so the Indian drugs were unreal or of no account until white man "discovered" them. This is one example among many of the ethnocentric attitudes which has hurt the white man more than the Indian, by delaying scientific inquiry into the Indian's knowledge of botany. Some of the drugs may have been of no use but what is striking here is the way it was rejected "a-priori" simply because white men know of no oral contraceptives, therefore presumable, they must be non-existent.

One oral contraceptive which has been tested in clinical experiments was the stone seed (Lithospermum Ruderales) of the Nevada tribes and some Navajos. The Indian woman drank an infusion of the roots for a period of six months. Upon investigation the preliminary experimental work showed that feeding mice extracts of this plant abolished the normal estrous cycle and decreased the weight of the sex organ.

Further research was done by extracting means of both the tops and the roots of the plants and it was found that the number of estrous smears decreased. Subsequent work with rabbits and other animals concluded that indeed lithosperma does inhibit the action of gonadotrophins in the ovary. In view of this it is now the conclusion that indeed this plant can be a real contraceptive drug.

In 1908 it was reported that in southwestern tribes there was a general belief among Indians that sterility may be artificially induced. To produce this result

the women took several otherwise harmless substances and an artificial sterility could be produced. The means of doing this has not as yet been researched.

The long periods of nursing infants, three years or more among certain Indians, was an effective birth control measure. This was especially true among Pueblo women who did not wish to conceive. Some Indians were well aware of "safe periods" for intercourse. Now over several dozen fertility-affecting drugs that were used by American Indians have been classified. The three classes that were divided were:

Oral contraceptive for temporary sterility period.

Substances, which in certain doses were believed to interfere with implantation or gestation for longer periods of time.

Plant materials that were believed to effect menstruation. These have active ingredients which have been isolated and their therapeutic activity determined.

In the first group are the boiled root of dogbane used by the Hopi and the Navajo. They also used a mixture of boiled root of wild ginger and infusion of milkweed plant. Also the Navajos had what was called "twisted medicine" of a plant whose official name is Bahia Dissecta. They also used the stone seed (Lithospermum).

In the second group the Cherokees used the powdered sqaw root (Caulophyllum Thalictrifolius) and the Nevada Indians used the solomonseal (Simlacina Stellata) in a root infusion that was thought to regulate menstrual disorders and the leaves were believed to prevent conception.

In the third group the last above drug was used in larger doses by the Chippewas. Actually most of the drugs in this category have been discussed before and were used in larger doses and their active ingredients have been verified by laboratory testing.

Reports of Attitude of American Indians toward conception.

Reliable (authentic scientifically oriented) reports in this area were very few indeed. However one report out of the 1973 Yale University School of Medicine is worth reviewing. The report noted that the population of the Navajo tribe has tripled despite an infant mortality rate of almost three times the national average.

The Public Health Service reports an increase of 2.3 per cent in the Navajo population while the national average is 0.9 per cent per year which reflected predominately the increase in the Navajo birth rate.

In the study it was found that very few women felt pressure from parents for or against birth control. That the Navajo women hardly ever communicated with her partner any information about birth control.

Of thirty women interviewed, most had a good idea of what oral contraceptives, intrauterine devices, and sterilization were about.

Epilogue A number of years ago there were some hundred and seventy-five different methods of birth control that were recorded.

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These by and large consist of oral contraceptives which actually have great value in some instances.

We should, however, take a moment to note that research does continue very intensively in a variety of areas and new contraceptive methods will undoubtedly be coming in the future. It is apparent that if we do not succeed through education and effective care systems to limit population growth our government as it has done before, may attempt to force the issue down our throats.

Bibliography "Notes on the Navajo Tongue," William H. Strange, M.D., American Medical News, Oct. 14, 1974. Detroit Free Press, Detroit, Michigan, Feb. 16, 1975. "Attitudes of 30 American Indian Women Toward Birth Control," Christopher M. Doran, Health Services Report, Aug.-Sept., Vol. 87, No. 7. "American Indian Medicine," Virgil J. Vogel, Ballantine Books, New York, N.Y., Sept. 1973. Journal of the American Medical Association, Feb. 7, 1975.

# Sen. Gravel Questions Secretary Designate

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Sen. Mike Gravel, D-Alaska, presented a series of questions on Alaskan issues to Interior Secretary nominee, Stanley K. Hathaway, as the Senate Interior Committee opened hearings Monday on his confirmation.

Gravel asked the former Wyoming governor to respond in writing to questions outlining his views on the Department of Interior's responsibility to Alaska Natives, Indian self-determination, easements on federal lands in advance of conveyance to Alaska Natives of some 44 million acres, the primary corridor study, the routing of a proposed gas pipeline and protection of the Arctic Wildlife Refuge, and the role he would see the state government play in the planning process for utilization of federal lands and in decision making about outer continental shelf leasing.

The Alaska lawmaker told the committee "my friends and constituents in Alaska would like an indication of the views and philosophies held by Mr. Hathaway which might reflect the kind of action we might anticipate from him as Interior Secretary."

"Since these questions are detailed and will undoubtedly require research," Gravel said, "I would like to respectfully request that Mr. Hathaway respond in writing for the record of this committee and to me personally

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# Two Bowhead Whales Caught at Point Hope

Hubert Koonuk of Point Hope is the first man in his village to catch a bowhead whale in this season of whaling. The whale was caught last Wednesday at 3:00 p.m. (Point Hope time).

And last Saturday, Seymour Tuzroyluke caught another and the two whales caught there so far assures Point Hope the big

whaling festival to be held early in June commemorating the events.

The whaling season at Point Hope will last until around the last week of May.

Whales have been sighted at Barrow and some whaling crews have already gone out on the ice at the Top o' the World Village.

## Brd. Approves Wolf Transplant

JUNEAU - The Board of Fish and Game has approved the transplant of wolves to other states and countries as a possible method of coping with Alaska's surplus wolf population.

The board also proposed regulations which would permit aerial hunting of wolves under strict standards and controls in areas where they are depleting the deer, moose or caribou.

The wolf resolution adopted April 22 at the board's spring meeting noted that the federal government in territorial days pursued a vigorous poisoning,

trapping and aerial hunting program against wolves.

Under state protection of the animals, including removal of bounties, classification of the wolf as a big game species and halting of aerial hunting for sport, wolves are now generally abundant throughout their original range in Alaska, the resolution stated.

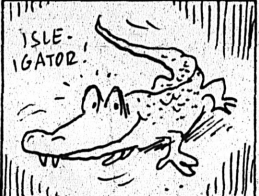
The board considers humane live capture for transplant as preferable to the destruction of surplus wolves and approved transplanting to other states and foreign countries under the direct supervision of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

However, the board also acknowledged the need to rebuild some populations of moose, Sitka deer and caribou and proposed regulations which could allow aerial hunting of wolves in units 5, 13 and 20, also under strict supervision by the department.

The proposed regulations to allow aerial wolf hunting will be published to allow for public comment and can then be approved by the commissioner of the Department of Fish and Game by authorization of the board.



"Filibuster" originally meant a pirate!



It was once believed that seeds from trees fell into small crevices on an alligator's scales, and took root so that he resembles a small island!

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