

Children stricken; drug to blame

Federal government beefs up DES research

MONTREAL (CUP) — The federal government recently granted DES Action Canada \$20,000 to research and distribute information about the effects of the synthetic hormone found to cause cancer in their children, even though the drug has been banned for that use since 1979.

Diethylstilbestrol (DES) was administered to millions of North American women between 1942 and the 1970s to prevent miscarriages. It was hailed as a wonder drug in the early 1950s and one of its early proponents claimed it would "make normal pregnancy more normal."

But in 1970 it was discovered by American gynecologists that post-pubescent daughters of mothers who had taken DES were developing a rare form of cervical cancer — clear cell adenocarcinoma.

Other side effects include genital structure abnormalities,

including vaginal or cervical ridges and hoods; adenosis or growth of benign tissue in the cervix; increased risk of miscarriage; ectopic pregnancies, still and abnormal genital development.

After increasing pressure from the medical community and following similar actions taken in the U.S., the Canadian government banned the drug from use in pregnancy in 1979.

The health and welfare ministry, now responsible for the \$20,000 grant, advised all doctors of the dangers of DES in 1970 and urged them to follow up on their patients. But they never checked to see if doctors heeded their advice.

"That's a professional responsibility," ministry spokesperson Ojars Lucis told a Maclean's reporter who researched the issue in 1980. The Canadian Medical Association has also run a number

of articles in its journal advising doctors to warn possible DES recipients of the dangers.

McGill University graduate Harriet Simand, who began a DES-Action group in Canada last May, is a DES daughter who developed cancer. Simand's mother took DES during Harriet's pregnancy in 1959.

Simand approached the McGill Women's Union when she began building a DES network in September. There are currently no DES support networks in Canada although they have existed in the U.S. for four years.

Paula Fleisher of the McGill DES group said "it is vital to reach out to people of university age. McGill is the population to reach."

Fleisher said a major problem is that statistics on the number of cancers caused by the drug are flimsy. No one knows how many women were exposed to DES since

it was marketed under more than 80 different brand names and in various forms. However, the U.S. department of health, education and welfare estimated in 1978 that between four and seven million Americans were exposed to the drug.

The Canadian government has also been reticent about dispensing information. According to the president of DES Registry in Washington, D.C., who has spoken with Canadian officials, "they didn't want to warn people and frighten them."

To further complicate research, DES was prescribed in the morning-after pill and to prevent vaginal bleeding and spotting. The hormone is now used only to treat extreme forms of breast and prostate cancer.

The McGill group will aid Simand in distributing information about the syndrome and serve as her resource bank by

assembling pamphlets and slide presentations. Simand presently operates DES-Action from one telephone in her basement.

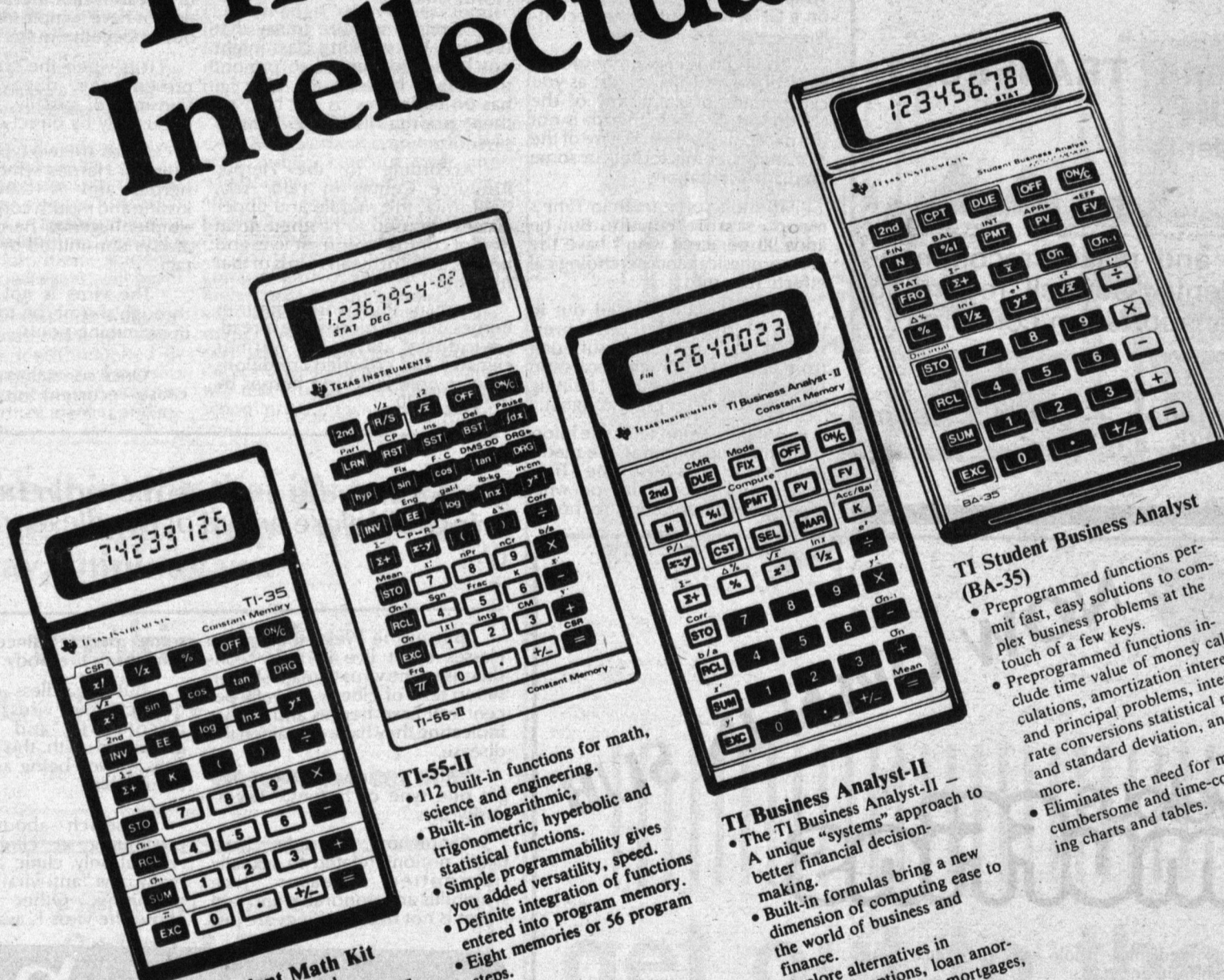
Future plans include establish a screen program at McGill Health Services. Anyone who suspects her mother took DES during pregnancy could then be tested conveniently. This would fill the information gap about the effects of the hormone.

Many doctors do not have the special instruments or stains required to test for DES-caused cancer, Fleisher said.

There are ten McGill teaching hospitals that screen women for DES side-effects. Soon urologists will be able to screen men for symptoms as well.

Up to 1,000 law suits have been filed against U.S. manufacturers for negligent distribution of DES. One victim won her case against Abbott Manufacturers of California in 1980, said Fleisher.

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