

Pill Chill

The French have a pill that makes abortions safer, faster and less traumatic. But the hubris of a huge corporation and the fears of the religious fringe are keeping it out of the hands of Canadian women.

by Susan O'Flinn

Imagine an abortion with no general anesthetic. With no struggling through angry, placard-waving, screaming protesters. It's already possible, but not for North American women.

Over ten years ago, a scientist working for the French drug manufacturer Roussel-Uclaf invented a steroid hormone similar in structure to the natural hormone progesterone.

Christened RU 486, and nicknamed the abortion pill, the drug's potential benefits are being lost amid political and religious arguments.

Roussel-Uclaf has a policy which says it will not market the drug in any country where there exists a potential backlash from anti-abortionists. They will not even apply for testing rights if the climate is 'unfavourable'. Currently, the company will only sell the drug in countries which have 'positive' abortion laws — unlike Canada, which simply does not have an abortion law.

This is the sole stumbling block preventing Canadian and American women from gaining access to the drug.

Questionable ethics

Norma Scarborough, co-chair of the RU 486 Committee established by the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League (CARAL), described the situation as a standstill. "We have met many times with the president. He gave us the conditions. [Canada] fulfilled them [by striking down the old abortion law] — now they've changed the rules. Now they want positive legislation."

Studies are also being conducted on the RU 486 role in preventing breast cancer. The drug manufacturer is testing it on a small group of women at Queen's University.

"I really question the ethics of a company which will not market it for something we know it is safe and effective for," said University of Toronto Professor Rebecca Cook, "but will test it on Canadian women in an area where its not known to be safe."

RU 486 can be taken as soon as the woman knows she is pregnant, unlike vacuum aspiration abortions which have to be held after six weeks. In addition, with no surgical invasion, there is no risk of perforation, damage to the cervix or infection from instruments.

The low death rate (one in 100,000) and non-invasive technique of RU 486 has a huge potential for women in third world countries, where the death rate from illegal abortions is one in 3,000.

Scarborough feels that the anti-abortion groups are particularly anxious about this procedure because it can be

conducted in any medical office. No more will they be able to congregate outside of abortion clinics and intimidate and harass the already nervous women.

So far no long-term health risks have been discovered. The drug's drawback is that it is only effective during the



• graphic by Carmel Camilleri

early weeks of pregnancy, so the need for surgery will not be completely abolished. Anti-abortion groups fear this comparatively easy procedure will encourage women to have abortions — rather like the great condoms-in-high-schools debate.

Anti-abortion groups in the prairies have already called for farmers to stop buying Roussel-Uclaf chemicals.

endometriosis, Cushing's syndrome, adrenal cancer, diabetes and osteoporosis.

The hope for Canadian women will probably lie in convincing the drug manufacturer of the drug's wide-ranging uses. Potentially it may revolutionize men's and women's health care. Maybe once its profit potential increases, women in North America will be able to join those in France, Britain and Sweden in using RU 486.

A time for truth and unity Remembering the massacre

On December 6, 1989, Mark Lepine shot and killed fourteen students at Montreal's École Polytechnique. They all paid, with their lives, for the crime of being women and wanting to succeed in the male-dominated field of engineering.

There are some who dismissed the tragedy of December 6, 1989 as an isolated act of a lone madman, and not as an attack against a particular group. Others saw it as a painful example of society's hatred towards women, and decided that the issue of violence against them had

been overlooked for too long.

Because of the targets of this murder, it especially had a powerful impact on university students. Judging from the events that have been taking place on campus' across the country every year since, the anger has not faded and neither has the impact of the incident. Vigils in honour of the victims, as well as other events give women the chance to mourn the loss of fellow human beings, to express their frustrations and to promote an awareness of violence against their gender.

This year is no exception. There will be several events around York the week of December 6.

Wednesday, December 2 the films "Sisters in the Struggle" and "After the Massacre" will be shown beginning at 12:30 in room 409 Student Centre. This will be followed by a poetry and prose reading on struggle and resistance at 5:30, Room 307 Student Centre.

Thursday, December 3, there will be a panel on women in the global struggle from 12:30 to 2:30, room 307 Student Centre. At 5:00 in room 409 of the Student Centre, there will be a forum on strategies to deal with violence against women

Friday, December 4 at 12:30 there will be a vigil in Vari Hall, followed by women-only open mike at Scott Religious Centre,

and a men-only discussion group in room 430 Student Centre, respectively taking place at 1:30. Finally at 3:30 there will be a healing circle for women.

Those of you who will be around the university of Toronto that week, can drop by the UofT Women's Centre and write what December 6 means to you on cardboard, which will be placed on spikes around campus anonymously if you like. There will also be a vigil on Friday, December 4 in UofT's Convocation Hall, twelve noon.

If you're the downtown type, you can also attend a candlelight march starting at Nathan Phillips Square on December 6 at 4:00. There will be an indoor reception there before the march at 2:30-3:15.