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Australian researchers: Nuns should take pill to protect against cancer

by Simon Caldwell by Catholic News Service

MANCHESTER, England -- Catholic nuns should take contraceptives to protect themselves against cancers linked to childlessness, two Australian researchers said in a British medical journal.

Writing in *The Lancet*, Dr. Kara Britt and Professor Roger Short say that oral contraceptives help prevent the onset of cancer of the breast, ovaries and uterus in women who have never had children.

"Catholic nuns are committed to leading a celibate, spiritual life in a monastery or convent," they said in the article, titled "The Plight of Nuns: Hazards of Nulliparity."

"In 1713, Italian physician Bernardino Ramazzini noted that nuns had an extremely high incidence of that 'accursed pest,' breast cancer," the researchers wrote, adding that research among more than 30,000 nuns in the U.S. found a similar problem.

They said: "Today, the world's 94,790 nuns still pay a terrible price for their chastity because they have a greatly increased risk of breast, ovarian, and uterine cancers: the hazards of their nulliparity."

They point out in the article that although Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical "Humanae Vitae" prohibited couples from using contraception to regulate their fertility, it was silent on the use of the pill for health benefits.

"Although 'Humanae Vitae' never mentions nuns, they should be free to use the contraceptive pill to protect against the hazards of nulliparity since the document states that 'the church in no way regards as unlawful therapeutic means considered necessary to cure organic diseases, even though they also have a contraceptive effect,'" say the researchers from Australia's Monash and Melbourne universities.

"If the Catholic Church could make the contraceptive pill freely available to all nuns, it would reduce the risk of those accursed pests, cancer of the ovary and uterus, and give nuns' plight the recognition it deserves," they said in the article, published online Dec. 7.

Britt and Short base their argument on research suggesting that women who have children at a young age and who also breastfeed them are less likely to develop the three cancers in later life.

The increased number of menstrual cycles in childless women is linked to an increased risk in developing cancer, they said.

Their arguments were met with mild skepticism, however, by David Jones, director of the Anscombe Bioethics Centre, a Catholic institute serving the Church in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

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"The claim that unmarried women without children, including nuns, 'should go on the pill' is one that should be viewed with caution," he wrote in a Dec. 9 email to Catholic News Service.

"It is the patient who takes the medicine and who may benefit but may also suffer from it," he said.

"We should remember that the medical profession has a history of creating problems by unnecessary over-prescribing of drugs," Jones added. "Nevertheless, if the pill would be beneficial for a particular woman's health, then it could be moral to use it.

"The contraceptive effect would be a side effect," he continued. "If it was not being used as a means of contraception, then it would not be wrong for that reason."

Sister Janet Fearn, a London-based Franciscan Missionary of the Divine Motherhood, who has served as a midwife in Zambia, said that the claims were also being taken with a "pinch of salt" by members of her community.

She told CNS in a Dec. 12 telephone interview that nuns in her convent discussed the report over the weekend "with a great degree of cynicism."

"It sounds a good story -- nuns put on the contraceptive pill -- but what happens within a doctor's surgery is an entirely different matter," she said.

"The contraceptive industry is going to say 'of course it (contraception) is all right -- the nuns are using it,' but we think it is completely wrong," she added.

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