

Working Class Mothers and the Birth Control Movement (1930-1953)

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This is the second and concluding part of this article, which will examine how well into the twentieth century, persistent ignorance of birth control methods, the cost of contraceptives, a lack of access to and the embarrassment of approaching the subject led to constant fear of unwanted pregnancies, untold suffering, ill-health, poverty and sometimes death. In an effort to alleviate and overcome these problems and provide safe and reliable forms of birth control, not only for working class women, but all married women, Leicester's Medical Officer of Health, Dr Charles Killick Millard and various other local pioneering women and men fought against Government restrictions, hostile opposition from some Leicester City Councillors and Church authorities, strongly held religious beliefs, medical professional protectionism and ignorance, moral judgement, prejudice and prudery.

The Birth Control Conference, held at Central Hall, Westminster, on 4th April 1930 was well attended by people from local authority maternity and child welfare centres, Labour Party Women's Sections, members of the Women's Co-operative Guild, and workers from birth control clinics and other local bodies. The conference resolved to call upon the Minister of Health, Arthur Greenwood, and Public Health Authorities to allow medical officers working in local authority maternity and child welfare clinics to give birth control advice to married women who requested it. This conference call, and the continuing demand on the Government for the provision of state controlled birth control facilities finally resulted in the Minister of Health responding to the pressure by issuing Memorandum 153/MCW three months after the conference. This gave permission for birth control advice to be given to married women attending the clinics whose health would be seriously compromised by a further pregnancy. Initially it was sent only to just a few selected local authorities, and was not issued to the press, which meant it only reached a very narrow audience until they were forced to re-issue it to all local authorities in March 1931.

Millard wasted no time in requesting permission from Leicester City Council's Health Committee to give birth control advice. The Committee responded favourably on 20th June 1930 to allow Medical Officers of Health in attendance at anti-natal and infant welfare clinics to advise married women where advice seemed appropriate.

Millard now felt able, for the first time, to write about the subject of birth control in a last minute addition to his 1929 Annual Report, which was published in July 1930. He also made it quite clear in the Report that Memorandum 153/MCW did not go far enough in terms of its eligibility:

Pending the time when Local Authorities generally will regard it as part of their duty to provide facilities whereby poor married women desiring it, and requiring it, can obtain medical advice on the subject of birth control, a number of Birth Control Clinics have been provided by voluntary effort in a number of towns. The following is a list: - London (4 Clinics), Wolverhampton, Cannock, Cambridge, Manchester, Salford, Glasgow, Oxford, Aberdeen, Birmingham, Rotherham, Newcastle-on-Tyne and Nottingham. (1)

In the same month that Millard's Report was published, the City Council deferred the Health Committee's decision, but when it was presented to them again in September, the Council passed it by 31 votes to 19.

Prior to the Council's deferment, the Health Committee resolved to join the National Birth Control Council (which changed its name to the Birth Control Association in 1931 and then to the Family Planning Association in 1939) and appointed Millard as their representative on its governing body. At a further meeting of the Health Committee on 3rd December they sanctioned the use of the Maternity and Child Welfare Clinic at 18 King Street to be used for the purpose of giving birth control advice.

As a response to the passing of Memorandum 153/MCW and because medical schools did not include contraception on their curriculum, the Royal Institute of Public Health thought it necessary to arrange a series of free lectures for medical practitioners on the subject of 'Contraception and Allied Questions.' Millard was invited by them to give a lecture on 'Contraception and the Medical Officer of Health.' (2) Dr Helena Wright, a leading figure in the birth control movement, writing in 1959, many years after these lectures, said that: 'A knowledge of birth control methods is still not demanded of qualifying doctors by the medical syllabus or the examining boards.' (3)

Leicester's first local authority Birth Control Clinic was opened on 26th March 1931 and although Millard was pleased to have achieved this goal, he was still clearly

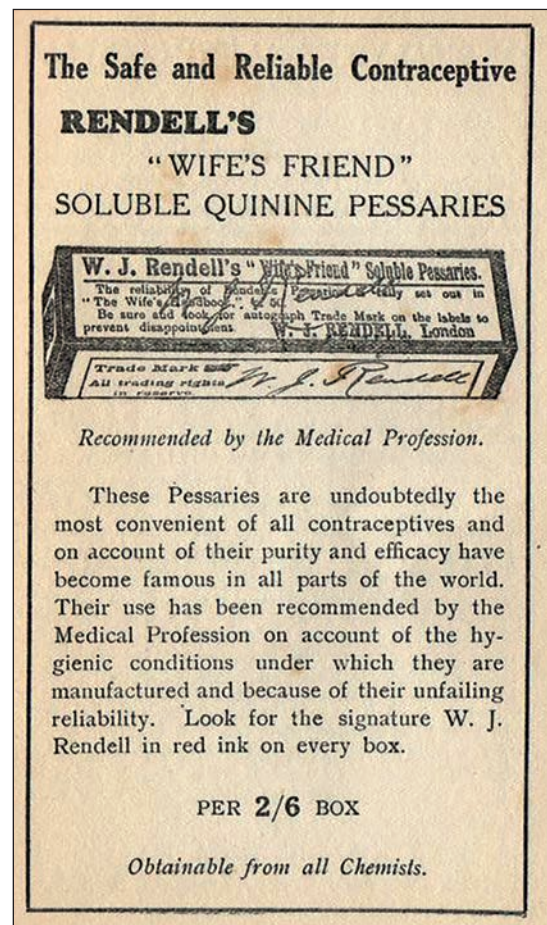
dissatisfied with the restricted eligibility of Memorandum 153/MCW which debarred many women from: '... receiving the advice on the matter of contraception which they so urgently need from the Birth Control Clinic specially designed for their benefit.' (4)

Consequently Millard continued to raise his concerns about the limitations of the Memorandum with the Ministry, including a meeting with Dame Janet Campbell (Senior Medical Officer in charge of Maternity and Child Welfare work) and Mr Maclachlan, Assistant Secretary on 3rd June 1931. Most members of the Health Committee had given Millard their continuing support, but it was not until a meeting held on the 5th April 1933 that they were finally able to give him permission to extend eligibility to a wider number of women with serious health problems, who had previously not been eligible because they did not attend the Maternity and Child Welfare Clinic. These included women suffering from tuberculosis, heart disease, kidney disease, diabetes, profound anaemia, certain types of arthritis, toxic goitre, also women suffering from mental disorders, including inheritable forms of insanity, epilepsy, or feeble-mindedness, as well as women suffering from local or gynaecological affections or malformation. (5)

Labour Councillor Emily Fortey, a member of the Health Committee, did not support Millard. She was a Catholic who was strongly opposed to birth control and this landed her in trouble with the local Labour Party in 1930, and again in 1931, when she ran a campaign to prevent contraceptives being supplied and sold to patients attending the Local Authority Birth Control Clinic. The issue was raised at a meeting of the Health Committee on 26th June 1931 when they decided by 24 votes to 15 that: '... it is desirable to purchase and resell birth control appliances to those women who are given advice on birth control at the Clinic provided for that purpose.' (6) This was a step forward in making it easier and cheaper for working class women to obtain contraceptives.

There was limited access to contraceptives for the average person other than sheaths, or 'Rendell's' spermicidal pessaries. Buying such items as sheaths, if they could be afforded, was often embarrassing because they were only available from chemist's shops, where they were neither on display nor advertised, or at barber's shops. This made it virtually impossible for women to buy them because of their association with prostitution. In the absence of contraceptives, coitus interruptus was a method commonly adopted but of course, this meant that women had no control over intercourse. Research into the 1930s, '40s and '50s carried out by Maureen Sutton in Lincolnshire demonstrates this:

We couldn't always afford to buy French Letters [sheaths] so we often did it without anything. He



Advertisement for Rendell's Pessaries. (The Author's personal collection.)

couldn't always time it proper so I got caught more times than I wanted. In the end we didn't do it so much. I couldn't stand it any longer; it was too much of a worry you see. I had nine and I didn't want no more. (7)

In Millard's 1929 Health Report he felt confident in saying that '... public opinion had changed greatly in recent years in its attitude to what is commonly referred to as birth control.' (8) This opinion was rather over-optimistic in reality as birth control remained a taboo subject. Even if someone had any knowledge of it, they were sometimes reluctant to admit to it, as explained by John Worsdall when talking about an incident which happened in 1934:

I remember me Mum, who was very narrow minded on some things, and she described Marie Stopes as an evil woman and yet one day I was looking in a drawer for something and I found two books by Marie Stopes and my Mum found that I was with them and of course she was at great pains to say that "I didn't buy them, they were lent to me". (9)

Reticence and embarrassment in approaching the subject with a doctor was still very evident in the 1940's, as told by Don and Doris Connolly who moved from slum housing in Brierley Street, Leicester, to New Parks Council Estate in the late 1940's:

When we moved from the city centre we had three children and that wasn't unusual then. You must remember at this time contraception wasn't talked about like it is today. It seems hard to believe but at that time people didn't talk about things like that. We knew of it vaguely, but not in any sort of direct way. I mean we wouldn't dare to ask anyone and no one volunteered to tell you about birth control. There were all sorts of tales about it. (10)

Lack of explanation by the doctor and the ignorance of the patient could also lead to such an example as the following experience described by Irene Bailey, a midwife working in the Belgrave Road area in the 1930's: 'The doctor told him to wear a sheath at all times. The patient took him at his word, but discovered that he couldn't pee with it on, so he cut a hole in the end and his wife became pregnant again.' (11)

In 1946, when Dr Sheila Lee came to Coalville, a largely working class town in North West Leicestershire, to take over a general practice, she was astounded by the birth control advice being given to patients by a local doctor: 'You know what makes babies, so if you don't want babies you know what to do.' (12) She also discovered that an unmarried midwife working in the town also gave the same advice.

It is not known how many of Leicester's general practitioners were sufficiently knowledgeable and willing to give birth control advice to their patients in the 1920s, '30s and '40s. Dr Gertrude Austin, who qualified in 1906, came to Leicester in 1910 to set up a general practice on London Road. She was an advocate of birth control as remembered by Dr Joan Walker:

... She had been the only woman doctor [in Leicester] to give advice at a time when it was a delicate subject ... Dr Lucy Simpson Davies would not have anything to do with it at all. She thought all artificial methods were wrong. She was not R.C. When I took over Dr Austin's practice [in 1938] she pressed on me very hard to do this work ... I had no end to the demand from women referred by each other. The majority of women who sought contraceptive advice were middle class and professional. (13)

The limited eligibility criteria needed to attend the Local Authority Birth Control Clinic, the absence of a voluntary sector clinic in the city, reliance on expensive contraceptives bought over the counter, coitus interruptus, abstinence and ignorance continued to cause married women to resort to the more drastic and dangerous practice of abortion. As a consequence the early 1930s began to see growing support for the legalisation of abortion. Millard gave his support to this movement when attending a debate on the medical

aspects of abortion at the Kensington Division of the British Medical Association on 15th November 1932:

... they all must be impressed by the hardship entailed upon married women who had large families of children ... and they all knew to what desperate straits these poor women were reduced. In spite of severe penalties, illicit or criminal abortion was still common and brought about grave injury to health ... the State ought not to interfere with the rights of the subject because of certain views which were based on dogmatic religion. (14)

Unlike the nineteenth century when there were no abortion statistics available for Leicester, there were some for the first half of the twentieth century. The 1937 Medical Officer of Health's report by Dr Kenneth Macdonald, who had succeeded Millard in 1935, confirmed the continuing number of known illegal abortions in Leicester: 'Increasing demand for accommodation at the LRI was met by the establishment in February 1935 of a maternity ward of 11 beds. It must be mentioned that during each year 314 patients includes an average of 100 cases of abortion.' (15)

Mrs Wakefield, a health visitor in the Wharf Street area of Leicester in the 1940s and early 1950s, recalled there being: '... quite a few 'back street' abortionists in the area. Some of them got into trouble.' (16) Wharf Street was in a very deprived, working class area of Leicester where Mrs Wakefield experienced firsthand the deprivation and poverty of some of the families that she visited: 'They lived in atrocious conditions. A lot of them were in back-to-backs [with] no running water [and] no bathrooms ... Very often they had about eight children ... [The mothers] would desperately try to breast feed and as soon as they had finished they were pregnant again.' (17) Mrs Wakefield was also clinic nurse at the Local Authority Birth Control Clinic and knew that if these women did not have a serious health condition they were unable to attend the Clinic: 'You see it was not for everybody ... it was only recommended on medical grounds ... so they had to have a note from their health visitor, midwife or doctor.' (18)

Continuing lack of access to the Local Authority Birth Control Clinic also affected other married women with low incomes who wanted to control the number of children they had, as experienced by Margaret Stanton. Margaret and her husband had their first child in 1944 and because they had very little money they wanted to space their children and so used 'Volpar Gels' (Voluntary Parenthood Gels) as a form of birth control: 'They came in glass containers and were very messy, but very effective ... I bought them from a chemist shop where I wasn't known ... Compared with food they were very expensive.' (19) Buying contraceptives from a chemist was often as embarrassing for the assistants as it was for the purchaser. Margaret recalled asking a chemist's

assistant for 'Farex' (baby food) and was instead given 'Durex' by an embarrassed, male assistant.

Margaret was unable to ask her general practitioner for advice because he was a: 'very remote figure' and she had discovered: '... that the Catholic influence had had some bearing on a lack of development of services [in Leicester].' (20) Since there was no clinic in Leicester, she decided to go to the Nottingham voluntary-run birth control clinic: 'The Clinic was in the basement of an old building [and although] it was very primitive they had the right equipment.' (21) This Clinic had been opened by a Nottingham women's group on 27th March 1930 and championed by the *Nottingham Journal*: 'A small group of courageous people in Nottingham had the courage of their convictions and formed a committee, in face of great difficulty and active opposition succeeded in establishing the first Birth Control Clinic in our city.' (22)

The 'Nottingham Women's Welfare Centre,' was situated at 100 Goldsmith Street. It was totally reliant on public donations. Even its Medical Officer, Dr Doris Nicklin, gave her services free of charge. Not only had the *Nottingham Journal* supported the opening of the clinic, it also allowed the women to advertise its weekly services and opening times and strongly criticised those who sought to condemn the Clinic:

Opponents tell us that the existence of Birth Control Clinics encourages prostitution. This is a gross insult to womanhood, and is certainly not correct. The patients who attend are all clean, normal, self-respecting married women, who are desirous of spacing their children for health or economic reasons. (23)

Going to Nottingham became quite a logistical problem for Margaret Stanton, so she therefore decided to try and get a F.P.A. clinic opened in Leicester. Prior to doing this she had established a tenants association on the New Parks Council Estate where she lived, and through this became aware of the great unmet need for contraceptive advice among various women members. Armed with this information in January 1949, she wrote to the Birth Control Advisory Bureau, the F.P.A., the Walworth Women's Welfare Centre and the North Kensington Women's Welfare Centre requesting information about how to establish an independent birth control clinic. The North Kensington Women's Welfare Centre was fulsome in giving Margaret detailed advice. However they thought that the F.P.A. would be more able to offer her help to establish a clinic, and this was eventually to be the case. A Mrs S. C. S. Robinson, general secretary of the F.P.A., responded to Margaret's letter demonstrating a clear determination to support the establishment of a clinic in Leicester, and that a Mrs Marjorie Evans, the Headquarters Organiser, would be willing: '... to spend a day



Margaret Stanton, c1940s. (Courtesy of Jenny Stanton.)

in Leicester and talk over the whole question with you ... and the local Medical Officer of Health to try to enlist his support.' (24)

The meeting took place on 2nd February 1949 but Margaret was not particularly impressed by Mrs Evans: 'I got the impression that she was quite taken aback to find a young presentable lady, living on a council estate. Someone who was very ordinary. I was quite hurt because I never heard from her again.' (25) Eventually Margaret was able to attend the Leicester Clinic on medical grounds. However, the battle to establish a F.P.A. clinic in Leicester was far from over, in fact it had barely begun.

Shortly after Margaret's efforts to establish a F.P.A. clinic, a small group of Leicester people were again to take up the challenge. Surprisingly they had no knowledge of Margaret's earlier efforts. Dr William Kind, a Leicestershire Medical Officer of Health, was to set the ball rolling again in 1950 when he wrote to the F.P.A. asking them to assess the possibility of opening a clinic in Leicester.

The action taken by the F.P.A. was to assemble a small nucleus of women who would, along with Dr Kind, form a committee with the intention of opening a clinic. Local women's groups were asked to put forward the names of women who were willing to serve on the committee. Mrs Lena Joseph's (then Pomerance) name was put forward by her sister, a doctor who already worked for the F.P.A. Lena had already done voluntary work for the Family Service Unit and had seen many problems created in families by unwanted pregnancies. Other women included Mrs Gladys Inglesant, the first treasurer, who had worked voluntarily for the Marriage Guidance Council and, like Lena, had witnessed marital problems caused by contraceptive ignorance. The other women to join the Committee were Mrs Dorothy Merrick, who became the initial chairperson before Dr Kind, Mrs Wilson, the secretary, and Mrs. Ena Ashwell.

The Committee knew that there had been opposition from: '... a strong Catholic influence on the Local Council' and from Dr E. B. Berenice Humphries, the Leicester Medical Officer for Maternity and Child Welfare, who had been appointed in 1929, who they regarded as: 'a prejudiced maternity and child welfare doctor.' (26) By the early 1950s Dr Humphries, who was in charge of the Birth Control Clinic, was still closely adhering to the criteria laid down by the Government in 1933. Lena Joseph remembered Dr Humphries' response when she knew about the intentions of the newly formed Committee: 'We didn't receive help of any kind from [her]. She warned people not to come if we did open a clinic because we didn't know what we were doing because we were just a bunch of interfering women ... She seemed quite unable to realise the worry that these poor women were having. Their real desperation ... in fact [she was] very, very prejudiced, yes.' (27) Doctor Humphries' clinic nurse, Mrs Wakefield, confirmed these accusations: 'Dr Humphries was very cross about the new clinic setting up because she didn't think it [birth control] should be available to everyone.' (28)



Dr Berenice Humphries, Leicester Medical Officer for Maternity and Infant Welfare Services and the Birth Control Clinic. (The Author's personal collection. Unable to trace original source.)

The Committee did not realise that there would be considerable opposition from various other quarters in the City. Their initial challenge was to find a room for committee meetings. As soon as their objective was discovered the rooms they had booked suddenly became 'unavailable'. After eventually finding premises, it took them a further two years to find suitable premises for the Clinic itself at St. Marks Church rooms, Belgrave Road, which was in the heart of a working class area. Just when they thought their troubles were over, one week before the scheduled opening, St Mark's Parish Council withdrew the offer: 'We did actually have our stock delivered there and

that's when they said they were horrified that we wasn't dispensing orange juice and powdered milk and threw us out. We were regarded as totally immoral, interfering with nature and all that. They wouldn't have anything to do with it.' (29)

The Clinic stationery had already been printed and general practitioners had also been notified of the Clinic's location and opening date. Having to have the membership cards and stationery reprinted was an expense the Committee could ill-afford. It was another four months before a member of the Committee eventually found other premises for the Clinic at the West End Adult School on Western Road, who had no objections to the Committee's aims.

Long before the Clinic opened the Committee had taken various decisions: 'We agreed right from the very beginning that we would never call clients patients and tried never to give any hint of medical reasons.' (30) They also decided not to wear uniforms, or to follow F.P.A. guidelines on what questions to ask their clients, including their religion.

The Leicester Family Planning Clinic was eventually opened in late October 1953. Above the entrance door to the hall where the Clinic was held there was a shield inscribed with the motto 'United we stand, divided we fall'. This could not have been more appropriate as it was a determined and united group of people who had fought long and hard to achieve their aim.

After almost three years of planning with many problems overcome, the opening night, as Lena Joseph recalled, was not entirely the success that they had envisaged. Only three women arrived at the Clinic, one of whom was pregnant. The session was also accompanied by a choral rendition of a song that left an indelible mark on Lena's memory: 'Different rooms were held for different purposes and our first night, above our heads, the local operatic society was rehearsing 'Chu Chin Chow' and I don't want to hear the 'Cobblers Song' again ... So the first night wasn't a rip roaring success.' (31)

Although the premises at the Adult School were adequate, their initial equipment was very basic: 'We managed to fit up a lot of screens, for which we made the curtains, and we had a large room and going off it was the kitchen, just the main kitchen for the building ... And at the other end of the building ... it had toilets. So, that make do as it was, we felt that it was possible.' (32)

Trestle tables were used for examination couches and made comfortable, as remembered by Gladys Inglesant: 'I had two old cot mattresses, so I covered them up well and we used those [to cover the trestle tables] until we could afford to get something.' (33) Gladys also recalled how as the treasurer:

'I remember going to the bank. I had to open an account you see ... and he [the cashier] said "Good Lord, I have never heard of these people".' (34)

All of the women who served on the Committee worked in the Clinic as volunteer interviewers, dispensers and receptionists. Lena believed that they were all: '... willing to work voluntarily for a cause we thought so worthy.' (35) Gladys believed: 'We were there to do service.' (36) This was despite the fact that her parents had told her that: 'I should have thought you could have found something better to do than that.' (37)

Ann Kind, the wife of Dr Kind, who had done some nurse training before marriage, helped with the Clinic work before becoming much more involved at a later stage: 'I would be doing the sterilising in the kitchen ... we had a fish kettle and we boiled up all the caps and instruments with the caretaker sitting there reading the *Mercury* and smoking.' (38)

The doctor and the nurse were the only medical staff and because the Clinic was run under the auspices of the F.P.A. the doctor had to be a woman. The name of the first doctor has been forgotten, but she was soon succeeded by Dr Marie Simpson who went on to work at the Clinic for many years despite the fact that: 'We were considered to be almost a dirty word.' (39)

Although the Committee did not use any form of advertising, word of mouth and G.P. referrals soon saw the numbers attending the Clinic increase, although to begin with it was largely middle class women who sought advice: 'After a little while people flocked in [and it was] first come, first served ... People sat with their stockings rolled down and their pants off waiting to be seen. [This was] to get them through quickly because we had only got one doctor and one nurse.' (40)

The Clinic's opening times were from 6 pm to 9.30 pm, but the demand was so great that it often did not close its doors until 10.30 pm. The F.P.A. policy was to help women to regulate and control their own fertility. Consequently, the methods of contraception that were recommended and dispensed from the Clinic were the 'Dutch' cap, spermicidal creams, gels and pessaries. Contraceptives were also sold at a cheaper price than in chemist's shops. A means test was introduced which meant that many working class women were able to benefit from a reduced fee and cheaper prices for the products, some women having nothing to pay at all. Finally, married women were now able to benefit from advice about safe, cheaper and reliable forms of contraception, without having to have medical grounds and without anyone standing in moral judgement of them, as had been the case when women sought advice from Dr Humphries who had made them 'feel very guilty!'. (41)

The conclusion to part one and two of this article has in many ways thrown up more questions than it has been able to answer, the principal one being why did it take so long for a voluntary birth control clinic, independent from the Local Authority, to be established in Leicester? A Nottingham women's group had achieved this in 1930 with the full backing of the local newspaper, the *Nottingham Journal*. This was an extremely brave decision taken by the Newspaper as the media's response to birth control coverage was extremely cautious until the mid 1950s.



West End Adult School, Leicester. (Reproduced by permission of the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland.)

Why then had Leicester's middle class women not followed the same route as the Nottingham women until the early 1950s? This is particularly interesting since the Leicester branch of the National Union of Women Workers, whose members were largely middle class, founded the Leicester Health Society in 1906 and through this had worked in a voluntary capacity with some of the most deprived and impoverished working class women in Leicester. Were these the women who Millard attacked in his 1917 presidential address to the Leicester Literary and Philosophical Society?

It does seem to me something approaching hypocrisy for the educated classes . . . to be quietly and privately availing themselves of the knowledge and means which science . . . has placed at the disposal of mankind, in order to escape from what they regard . . . as the evil of over-childbearing, and yet to join in a conspiracy of silence to keep this same knowledge from reaching the poor who need it so very much more. (42)

To attempt to answer this question in this conclusion would not do it justice as it is far too lengthy and complex. There are, however, other questions that can be answered to some degree, but even here a lack of evidence makes it difficult to be conclusive.

Millard became a local and national leading figure in the birth control movement and was held in high esteem by his fellow campaigners. It took him many years to integrate birth control advice into the Local Authority Maternity and Child Welfare services, believing them to be natural allies. Although he must have felt a sense of achievement in accomplishing this, he must also have been disappointed that contraceptive advice was still not available to all people who requested it, particularly poor working class mothers.

When looking at the overall picture in Leicester, in conjunction with the national one, Leicester certainly seems to have had many similar barriers to the widening of its birth control services. The Catholic influence had a considerable impact nationally on its lack of development as discussed in Audrey Lethard's book *The Fight for Family Planning* and this can clearly be seen to have been evident on Leicester City Council. Dr Humphries also played a significant role in limiting the scope and development of the Local Authority Birth Control Clinic. She kept within the strict 1933 Government guidelines, whereas some Medical Officers of Health, by the early 1950s, took a more liberal interpretation.

Lethard also cites financial economy as having a considerable contribution to the lack of services developing nationally. This was certainly the case why contraception was not included in the National Health Service in 1948. It was also a factor raised by Dr Kind and the Committee of women in the early 1950s: 'When we first met as a committee we felt how wrong it was for such a prosperous city, which was at that time very go ahead. It was either the second or third wealthiest city in Europe, if you please, and yet no money was available for this kind of welfare.' (43)

Although these two articles have been limited by the lack of evidence in certain areas, there does seem to have been a great deal of hostility to the widening of birth control facilities from some major sectors of Leicester's society. This undoubtedly led to a great deal of unhappiness, anxiety and suffering, and in some cases, an untimely death for an unknown number of working-, and even middle-class women.

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