

British Store Gives Women Emergency Pill, Igniting Debate

By WARREN HOGE

LONDON, March 17 — A decision by Britain's largest supermarket chain to hand out free morning-after pills to teenagers has sharpened a national debate over efforts to curb the country's rate of youth pregnancies, the highest in Western Europe.

Britain recorded 95,000 teenage pregnancies in 2000, and the government has pledged to halve that number by 2010. As part of that effort, the emergency contraception known as the morning-after pill was allowed to be sold over the counter a year ago.

Pharmaceutical companies have been aggressively promoting the pills, with one of them, Schering, placing eye-catching advertisements this month for its Levonelle tablets in magazines aimed at women, and in women's toilets in bars and nightclubs. The ad reads "Missed pill. Ooops. Emergency contraception!!! Quick. Pharmacy. Buy Levonelle." It ends with the word "phew."

The company said it planned its campaign after surveys showed that only 40 percent of British women knew that the pill was now available from pharmacies.

The price of the over-the-counter emergency contraception is \$30. Under Britain's health care system, it can also be obtained free on prescription, but many women avoid taking the time to see a doctor because the pill is more effective the sooner it is taken after intercourse.

The Tesco supermarket chain revealed Saturday that it was dispensing the pills free to women under 20 under a pilot project in Weston-super-Mare and Clevedon, two towns in Somerset in western England. No proof of age is required, but pharmacy counter staff are asked to use their judgment.

Nuala Scarisbrick of Life, a 35,000-member anti-abortion group, argued that the Tesco decision would increase teenage pregnancies by promoting promiscuity. "This is giving the green light to teenage sex," she told the BBC.

Simon Bilous of the North Somerset Teenage Pregnancy Clinic, which is coordinating the program, disputed the claim. "In other countries in Western Europe, where they have much more liberal approaches to these issues, the numbers have dropped."

Questions have also been raised about the pill's safety, particularly among teenagers. "There is no data on subsequent fertility when a young developing body is exposed to such high doses of hormones," the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics reported last month.

The High Court has granted a judicial review of a case brought by the national anti-abortion group, the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children, to halt the sales of the pills over the counter. A bill to stop the new practice was defeated in the House of Lords last year.

The society is arguing that the pill is in fact a method of early abortion and violates an 1861 law barring the supply of any "poison or other noxious thing" with intent to cause a miscarriage.

Family planning campaigners have warned that a ruling endorsing this view would call into question the legality of everyday birth control.