

WOMEN'S HEALTH AND JUNK SCIENCE

THE INDEPENDENT Women's Forum, custodian of sanity on all matters affecting women — that is, on life — held a conference last month to examine a hot topic: "Women's Health, Law and the Junking of Science."

The orthodox view on the medical establishment's treatment of women is that they are victimized. Women, it is often charged, are denied their rightful representation in clinical trials of new drugs. Women are gulled into accepting unsafe products, like silicone gel breast implants. Women are denied safe and effective birth control.



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The IWF's panel of experts demonstrated all of those assump-

tions to be myths — but myths advanced and strengthened by feminist scholarship. "Logic has been made a dirty word," explains Barbara Ledeen, executive director of the IWF. Several academics at the conference noted that feminist theorists, in their hatred of male-dominated science, have attacked logic itself as a weapon in the sex wars. A feminist astronomer objects to the term "Big Bang," Professor Christina Hoff Sommers informed the gathering. If elite colleges are purveying superstition in the name of feminism, is it really such a surprise that disrespect for scientific reasoning has seeped into the majority culture?

Dr. Sally Satel, formerly a professor of psychiatry at Yale, said the myth of women's exclusion from clinical trials can be traced to the famous Framingham heart study. But the reason males dominated that study is that women tend not to get heart disease until they are over the

age of 65, and for a variety of reasons, it is more difficult to study older subjects. Overall, however, women represent about 50 percent of study participants.

Dr. Marcia Angell, the first woman editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, offered a case history of the way hysteria, greed, a flawed legal system and junk science combined to create the debacle on breast implants.

About 2 million American women have silicone gel breast implants. After a series of news stories — using, it need hardly be said, only anecdotal evidence — raised the possibil-

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ity that implants might cause disease, the FDA, under Dr. David Kessler, decided to ban them. Within two years, more than 1,000 lawyers filed 16,000 lawsuits against implant manufacturers. Hundreds of thousands of women were terrified. Plastic surgeons were flooded with worried calls. One patient even attempted to remove her own implants with razor blades.

Juries began to award enormous judgments to women who claimed that implants caused their diseases. The only thing missing was good, scientific evidence. At the time the FDA banned the implants, there were no epidemiologic studies showing any

relationship between connective tissue disease and breast implants. The jury awards, and indeed the FDA's action itself, were based on "junk" science.

In April 1994, implant manufacturers, faced with thousands of liability claims, agreed to a \$4.25 billion settlement (\$1 billion explicitly set aside for the lawyers). Two months later, the first study was published on the breast implant-/connective tissue disease question. Its conclusion: There's no connection. Since then, 10 more studies have found the same thing.

So hundreds of thousands of women were terrified, many had unnecessary surgery, and billions of dollars changed hands — for what?

Reading between the lines of what these careful scientists and medical professionals at the IWF conference were saying, it became clear that the breast implant case represents discrimination against women all right, but not the kind feminists worry about. If Kessler and Co. had seriously supposed silicone to be dangerous, why didn't they ban it from hair spray, deodorant and other common products? And why, if silicone is harmful, is it still permitted for cancer patients requesting breast reconstruction? The answer is that Kessler is a liberal totalitarian who disdains cosmetic breast augmentation and has issued a *Diktat* in the guise of science.

As breast implants went, so went Norplant, an easy, reliable, safe contraceptive that unfortunately uses silicone. Sales of Norplant dropped from 800 per day to 60 after the implant scare. Fear of lawsuits (unrelated to silicone) also banished the Today Sponge contraceptive and Bendectin (an anti-nausea drug for pregnant women).

The IWF brings intelligence, reason and zest to debates that for too long have been dominated by zealots and charlatans.

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