



A Thought for the New Year on Personal Responsibility



By Eleanor Rodgerson, MD

WE READ AN EDITORIAL on the demise of the influential media, a column about the commotion following Arafat's death, one on the UN's difficulties, and another on the Patriot Act and civil liberties.

On a backpage, we found the news that a child may grow up and develop cancer, probably breast cancer, in her later years because of the fatty food her mother ate during her pregnancy.

We already have the deformities produced by drugs and drink. Here is one more prenatal risk. Responsibility comes to the fore.

There was a time not so long ago when prospective mothers heard comfort lectures, the kind that spoke of the safety in pregnancies tucked away from harm in the protective uteri. Not to worry. Eat a balanced diet, don't overdo the exercise, don't worry about marking the baby when sighting a human deformity.

Gradually, though, research found firm reasons for the less-than-normal babies that were born.

Genetic findings were not always the causative factors. Other abnormalities often depended upon personal maternal responsibility.

But there is this problem. People say, "We have rights to live our lives the way we want to." So, will mothers accept and conform to the best knowledge we have? Is personal responsibility enough?

Should neglect be allowed in the care a fetus requires? But we don't regulate these personal things.

Can responsibility be developed?

Can a mother be persuaded to assume responsibility for healthy children and healthy generations to come?

In the face of what is required, will the birthrate fall in thinking communities in the face of all this responsibility?

Or, will it remain as usual because of unexpected, unplanned pregnancies?

Perhaps this requirement for extra responsibility toward future generations will waken other responsibilities, the common ones. It's an idea that could affect the whole legal and medical professions.

It's intriguing to contemplate what a country with almost perfect offspring would become. There would be the dimming of the legal profession's influence and a shift in the medical profession, perhaps to psychiatric therapeutics. The planning and expense of health care

programs would fade and lose their debate.

Live long enough and look back 50 years and recount the miracles in living that have happened.

Look back 10 years and note computer and communication developments. Anything seems possible.

But there may come a time when the right to do as one pleases is not enough. Motherhood is a trust, a fearful responsibility to offspring as well as to humanity.

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