The Dalkon Shield saga

Twenty-five years ago, in 1977, the Family Planning Research Unit of the University of Exeter issued its sixth and final report on the ill-fated Dalkon Shield. Should it have been the last word on this topic? Maybe, but it certainly was not!

On 24 February 1984, the Chief Justice for Minnesota arraigned the officers of AH Robins, manufacturers of the Shield: ‘You have planted in the bodies of these women instruments of death, of mutilation, of disease ... a deadly depth charge in their wombs, ready to explode at any time’. In 1986, the solicitor to the West Midlands Regional Health Authority, claiming that 1200 women in his Region had been injured by the Shield, quoted the Minnesota judge and thus strongly implied that doctors in the West Midlands had also been planting ‘depth charges’! He followed this up by demanding that every family planning doctor in the Region should explain why they had been fitting Shields. The mountain of litigation, mostly in the USA, destroyed AH Robins.

The Shield had made a good start. In 1970 the inventor Hugh Davis, reporting 640 insertions, subtitled his paper ‘A superior modern contraceptive’. A much fuller account was given in his 1971 book. However, in June 1974, AH Robins suspended sales because there had been cases of septic mid-trimester abortion in the USA in wearers of the Shield, some of which had been fatal. A few months later, in October 1974, a subcommittee of the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Advisory Committee of the Food and Drugs Administration (FDA) in the USA concluded that the safety and efficacy of the Shield was ‘not significantly different from other IUDs’ and recommended the ban be lifted. It was not lifted. Suggestions had been made that the multifilament tail of the Shield facilitated ascending infection. Initially AH Robins intended to introduce a modified version but never did so. In 1980, AH Robins and the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) recommended that women still wearing Shields should have them removed. A case-controlled study in the USA in 1983 recommended that women still wearing Shields should explain why they had been fitting Shields. The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) modified version but never did so. In 1980, AH Robins suspended sales because there had been cases of pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) related to the Dalkon Shield; ‘You have planted in the bodies of these women instruments of death, of mutilation, of disease ... a deadly depth charge in their wombs, ready to explode at any time’. In 1986, the solicitor to the West Midlands Regional Health Authority, claiming that 1200 women in his Region had been injured by the Shield, quoted the Minnesota judge and thus strongly implied that doctors in the West Midlands had also been planting ‘depth charges’! He followed this up by demanding that every family planning doctor in the Region should explain why they had been fitting Shields. The mountain of litigation, mostly in the USA, destroyed AH Robins.

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Thus, it is clear that the UK and Dublin experience failed to confirm the USA experience. The problems in the USA resulted, on that side of the Atlantic, in an aversion to the IUD method on the part of doctors and the public, an aversion which is only now beginning to dissipate.

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Michael L Cox, FRCOG, MFPP
Consultant Obstetrician and Gynaecologist (Retired), Yew Tree Lodge, Main Street, Highham-on-the-Hill, Nuneaton CV13 6AJ, UK. Tel/Fax: +44 (0) 1455 212799

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