

# Girls injected with contraceptive U.S. has banned

The controversial contraceptive Depo-Provera is being given to girls as young as 14 at a Victorian State remand and youth training centre. HELEN THOMAS reports.



SINGLE USE

RUTH MADDISON

**S**EVEN years ago medical staff at Winlaton Youth Training Centre — Victoria's only statutory remand and youth training centre for young women aged between 14 and 21 — started administering the injectable contraceptive Depo Medroxyprogesterone Acetate (Depo-Provera).

Girls considered "at risk" of becoming pregnant were given the shot as an alternative to taking more

lot of weight. Now I can't lose it. And I suffered with migraines while I was in there. I dunno if that's in the injection, but I never had it before I went in there.

"When I started gettin' the needle, I used to get migraines every single day. But now I only get it, say, once a week or so and it gets me very depressed."

Inside a similar pizza-place, 18-year-old "Maggie" battles the flu and a lack of cigarettes

"See, I thought it was the needle but I didn't say nothin'. The doctors just said I was really filled up with muck inside. They say it works on some people, on some people it doesn't. It didn't do me any good."

**N**ONE of these girls knows the drug as Depo-Provera: they refer to it only as the needle or the shot. Some defend it, or at least their decision to take it inside Winlaton. But almost every

amant. She says she "wouldn't let them stick it in me" at Winlaton, because of "what it can do. I reckon it's worse than the pill and that".

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Depo-Provera was developed in the early 1950s by the Upjohn Company and has been used as a palliative for uterine cancer, among other malignant conditions. In the last 10 years particularly however, it has been widely used as a contraceptive — being an injectable synthetic hormone that prevents ovulation, usually for

Girls considered "at risk" of becoming pregnant and unreliable as far as taking more conventional contraceptives (such as the pill) have been advised to use the drug.

This is despite it never having been approved for general marketing as a contraceptive in Australia — despite the fact, too, that its use anywhere in the world is controversial, mainly due to its possible links with cancer.

Most teenagers in Winlaton come from disadvantaged socio/economic backgrounds and are either wards of the State, or under sentence.

Many placed on Depo-Provera in this institution have been under 16, at least one as young as 14. And while medical staff there are convinced the drug is a comparatively safe, effective way of stopping unwanted pregnancies, young women now outside the centre's high, barbed-wire fences tell grimmer stories.

Like 17-year-old "Pam":

"I was in there in 1980 for five months, they asked me about it, right, and I had to get me mother's signature. When I got that, they gave me one shot. I was 15 and I got at least two needles: I didn't get me period from it.

"Then I got released and ever since, I haven't had me period — that's a year and a half now." She recounts these details crouched against the wall of a pizza parlor in Fitzroy Street, St Kilda, the major drag of Melbourne's seediest red-light strip.

It's almost midnight on a wet Friday but Pam and her friends — most of whom have been in and out of Winlaton several times — seem to tough-it out on the street in total defiance of the conventional clock, a despair underlying all attempts to beat their boredom.

"I went to the VD (Family Planning) Clinic in the city and told them I wasn't gettin' it and they said to come back, but I haven't turned up. But yeah, it worries me: I might go to me own doctor and see what he says about it 'cos I'm scared I might not be able to have kids.

"They didn't explain nothin'. They just said, y'know, the side-effects might be either not gettin' your period or you bleed too much or something and they didn't say it was gonna last so long.

"They give you a choice — between it and the pill — but they suggest 'the needle' to you. They reckon it's better. But I wouldn't say to anyone else to go on it.

"I got a girlfriend that I call a sister — she went on it, but she kept on bleeding. She was bleeding for about a month, two months non-stop, so she couldn't be on it. It's got bad side-effects, y'know.

"Like when I went on it. I started puttin' on a

"Maggie" battles the flu and a lack of cigarettes as she remembers getting a Depo-Provera injection.

"When I got the needle, my periods stopped. I didn't know what it was, I just got pains and all that and had to go to hospital. I was 14.

"I just said to the doctor at Winlaton that I wanted the needle because it was the in thing. It was the thing that they just got out, or that I'd just heard of and I just had it, y'know, to stop me gettin' pregnant.

"Four months after I had one shot, I went into hospital to have a curette — ever since then, I haven't had the needle again.

"But three months ago (four years later) I had to go into hospital again, for me tubes. I was in there for a week — no, 10 days — and I had drips and everything. If I hadn't gone in within a month of when I did, I wouldn't have been able to have kids because me tubes were all messed up.

"It wasn't just the needle, it was other things too — but the needle had something to do with it, I know. But, see, I couldn't go on the pill because I was haemorrhaging with that and I didn't want the loop.

"Anyway, the night I went into hospital I was down here (Fitzroy Street) — I nearly collapsed and they took me down to casualty at the Alfred Hospital.

to take it inside Winlaton. But almost every ex-Winlaton inmate The National Times spoke to knew of the drugs' side-effects, usually from their own or a close friend's experience.

"Ruth", for instance:

"At first when I asked for it, they didn't want me to have it. But when I got my mother's permission, they said I could. I was 16.

"I didn't have no side-effects. Oh, when I first got the needle — y'know, when they stuck it in — I felt dizzy and that. But that's about all.

"And it's mucked up my periods. I don't get any periods. I did, but I haven't for three months now."

"Diane", still in Winlaton, says she started using the drug "because then I wouldn't forget to take it, would I? and to stop me gettin' pregnant".

In terms of side-effects, she says "I've just had me periods for a long time, that's all — just for a few weeks. It doesn't really bother me, but I don't really want it."

Even if they've never been give the needle, most of these teenagers are aware of its' consequences. "Kristy", an 18-year-old in leather jacket and jeans, says she knows girls "who went right off the rags" after taking a shot, others who have "been bleeding every day for sometimes a couple of months."

But 17-year-old "Robyn" is the most ad-

hormone that prevents ovulation, usually for three months after one shot. It is available commercially in 80 countries.

But in 1978, the Food and Drug Administration refused marketing approval for the drug in this capacity in the US, concerned among other things about its possible links with various forms of cancer.

In fact, controversy about the general release of Depo-Provera relates to cancer of the breast, uterus and cervix.

The Australian Drug Evaluation Committee has never approved Depo-Provera generally as a contraceptive and in 1980, the NSW Family Planning Association placed a "moratorium" on its use in its clinics.

Indeed, the drug evaluation committee officially regards its use "as being investigational" because of unresolved questions about its long-term and immediate side-effects, which can include amenorrhoea (abnormal absence of menstruation), irregular bleeding, weight gain, loss of libido, nausea, mood changes and abdominal bloating.

But it can be used as contraception in specific cases in this country. The committee says it is "largely" used when a doctor has made a judgment about a female patient's "reliability" (or lack of it) to take "normal contraception".

"The problem with Depo-Provera is its side-effects," a committee spokesperson says. "Once one's had the injection, it has an effective life of three months — but it can stay in the system possibly for six months."

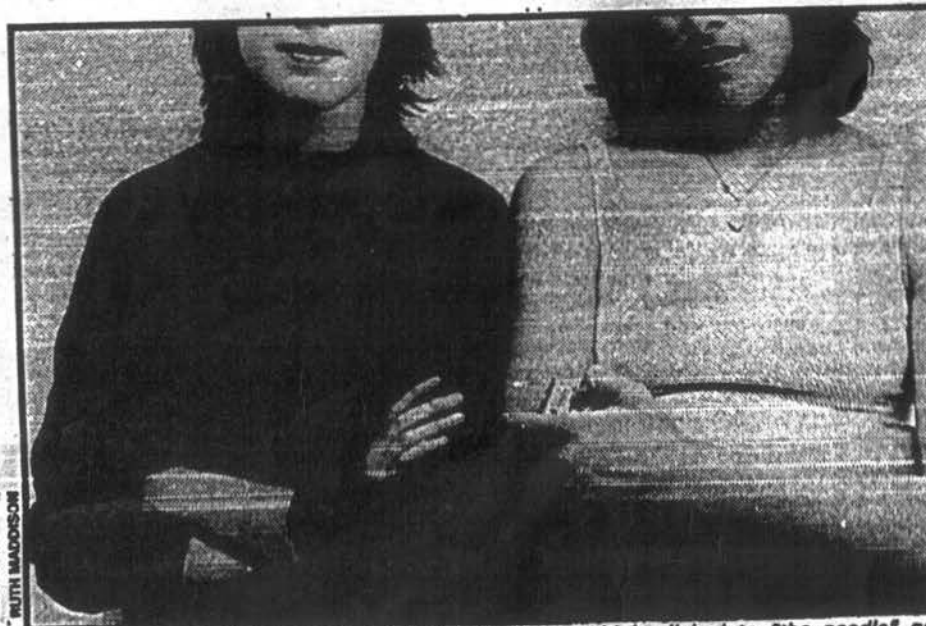
It is estimated that only 2,000 to 3,000 women use the drug at any one time in Australia.

In fact, an article in the Medical Journal of Australia last year asserted that over a six-month period, "only about 500 doses of Depo-Provera were prescribed through Australian State Family Planning Association Clinics, in a total of 80,000 visits."

Yet, at least 10 per cent of the girls now in Winlaton Youth Training Centre are taking the drug — and senior nurse/charge Sister Margaret Donagan estimates between 50-60 use it there each year. Outside sources allege twice as many take it.

"We offer it to them along with every other form of contraception," Sister Donagan says. "We only ever give it with signed parental permission if the girl's under 16; if she's over 16, she can give her own permission. It's explained fully to her."

But at least one legal group in Victoria believe this attempt to encourage parental involvement is nothing more than "a PR exercise".



Once girls leave Winlaton, most side-effects that could be linked to "the needle" go unreported at least to that institution.

RUTH MADDOSON

"Legally, that permission form means nothing," a lawyer from the Women's Legal Resource Group said last week. "The girls in Winlaton are either in there as wards of the State, or under sentence."

"The State legally takes over the role of parent or legal guardian for wards. But where Depo-Provera is concerned it's trying to make the parent the 'proper parent' again."

"It's trying to waive wardship for one decision in these kids' lives, which it just cannot do."

The WLRG claims more than 90 per cent of girls in Winlaton are there for "care and protection", or because they have "presently irreconcilable differences" with parents.

"Until Depo-Provera is proven a safe contraceptive, it's grossly irresponsible for the department to be exposing them to it," their spokesperson says.

**T**HE amount of information Winlaton makes available on the "consent" form is minimal and jargonistic. It lists some of the known side-effects, then states "in medical research in the US, Depo-Provera has been demonstrated to cause pituitary suppression, permanent amenorrhoea, infertility and endometrial atrophy (explained to patient)."

It does not say the drug is banned in America — nor does it point out that it is available here only in a restricted way as a contraceptive, as it is in the UK.

It does, however, attempt to waive the Community Welfare Service's (CWS) liability, should serious side-effects occur. The parent is asked to sign after the clause "I realise there may be side-effects, please note below, to its use and I release the CWS from responsibility of same." (Interestingly, it does not try to clear the Health Commission, which oversees Winlaton's medical clinic.)

But the WLRG insists the Community Welfare department must, by law, take responsibility for what happens to these young women inside the institution.

"Yet, here we have the department admitting it's doing a dangerous thing — administering a drug that could cause severe side-effects — but all the while, it's trying to fob-off its legal

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Although little used in Australia, Depo-Provera is being used by 10 per cent of Winlaton girls.

responsibility. The 'consent form' is a sham and it's intent immoral."

Sister Donagan says the girls are given "pretty extensive" counselling about Depo-Provera. "Both our medical officers know a great deal about the drug ... we explain it to them as best we can, with whatever information we have."

"We're always guided by Dr Ken Waldron, the director of the Family Planning Clinic at the Queen Victoria Hospital and Dr Gab Kovacs, medical director of the Family Planning Association (Vic)."

Unlike its NSW counterpart, Victoria's FPA allows the use of Depo-Provera in its clinics. But last year, only 12 out of 26,000 patients were on it.

"Our policy is that it is one of the methods

available for contraception, if the doctor and patient concerned feel its the most suitable method," Dr Kovacs says.

He explains that the drug is usually used in a situation where the patient doesn't or can't take oral contraception, or when an inter-uterine device can't or won't be tolerated.

"It's infrequently used," he says. "It's not something we push on them, but its available."

If side-effects do arise when a girl is still in Winlaton, immediate action is taken: for instance, Sister Donagan says "one or two" inside now have reported continual bleeding. "Generally, that can be counteracted by adding a small dose of estrogen for 10 days," she says.

But once girls leave Winlaton, most side-effects that could be linked to "the needle" go unreported at least to that institution.

And as FPA clinics don't keep statistics relating to patients who have been in and out of Winlaton — they don't want to "stigmatise" them — it's impossible for relevant authorities to have an accurate picture of how many or severely these young women suffer side-effects, once they're outside.

Melbourne's Anglican archbishop, the Most Reverend Robert Dunn, also indicated concern about Winlaton's use of the drug last year, on behalf of Victoria's nine provincial Anglican bishops, in a letter to then Community Welfare Minister, Walter Jona.

It's understood, too, that at least one bishop wants to pursue the matter with the present minister, feeling they were "palmed-off" by Mr Jona, in his written reply.

Staff at Winlaton admit they constantly debate whether or not this drug should be administered to the girls in their care. Superintendent Dr Eileen Slack describes herself as "professionally hesitant".

"And I think it's a healthy hesitancy because it's an awesome responsibility to be working with these young people and their lives today and all their tomorrows. I don't mean to sound melodramatic, but that's where it's at."

While she is superintendent of the institution itself, Dr Slack does not control its medical clinic. That responsibility falls to the Health Commission.

"If I had the ultimate say, I would say 'we will continue to be guided by the Food and Drug Administration in the US.'"

Not surprisingly, this issue has caused considerable unease within the State's new Labor Government.

Both Community Welfare Minister, Pauline Toner and Health Minister, Tom Roper were too busy to discuss it last week. But their press secretaries said they were looking into the situation.

Toner's statement claimed she and Roper were "discussing the matter", adding the Health Commission had been asked "to prepare a report on all additional information that's been made available recently on Depo-Provera."

Roper's press aide said a detailed investigation into Depo-Provera's possible side-effects was necessary, before the minister could comment further.