

STATE OF THE ART

A SURVEY OF TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY, BY THE EDITORS

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'Tis the Season?

Women Off the Cycle, Men on the Pill

Ever since Margaret Sanger set up shop in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn in October 1916, dispensing her contraceptive wares, brouhahas over birth control have erupted with predictable frequency. The latest involves a new "extended cycle oral contraceptive" called Seasonale, created by Barr Laboratories. The pill, which is taken for 84 consecutive days before a week of placebos, has the effect of dramatically lowering the number of women's menstrual cycles from once a month to only four times a year (hence the catchy name of the drug, a play on quarterly seasonal change). Seasonale even has a celebrity spokeswoman—*Sex and the City* writer Candace Bushnell, the cosmopolitan cocktail-swilling "it" girl of several cultural moments ago.

Although the Food and Drug Administration has approved the pill, some ethicists and feminists have raised concerns about what the drug's main side effect—limiting menstruation—might mean for women. As New York University professor Emily Martin recently wrote, "One

has to wonder whether the virtual elimination of women's periods might make women's bodies appear more calm, steady and predictable; in short, less "troublesome." Dr. Joan Chrisler, the president of the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research, went so far as to invoke "menstrual taboos" and sexism for the advent of Seasonale. "Cultures have long had many practices to manage the taboo and stigma of menstruation over the years," she says. "You can see them all as ways of managing women's behavior. Many feminists would say that misogyny is at the base of it."

But many women are eager to avoid menstruation. A survey released last year by the Association of Reproductive Health Professionals found that 44 percent of women aged 18 to 22, and 59 percent of women aged 40 to 49, said they would prefer not to menstruate at all. "I love it. My friends all know all about it because I... rave about it," said one enthusiastic Seasonale research subject.

Meanwhile, lost amid the handwringing over Seasonale and the extinction of men-

stration was an equally dramatic development in contraception: the announcement of an Australian research team's success developing reliable and safe birth control for men. As *Time* magazine reported in October, "For one year, 55 men took an experimental birth-control drug. All of them had fertile partners; none of the women got pregnant." The only side effect, evidently, was "a slightly elevated libido," which, the chief researcher was eager to note, is something people pay good money for these days. According to the *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism*, which published the study, the men took injections of the hormone progestin to suppress sperm production (washed down with a little testosterone to avoid side effects). The drug in its current form has to be injected, but public opinion surveys have found that men, like women, would prefer birth control in pill form; and researchers

speculate that, within five years, they might have a pill version of the drug.

As for the idea that men are less receptive to taking birth control, *Time* reports, "In fact, recent surveys have shown that significant numbers of men are interested in a contraceptive drug." Two pharmaceutical companies in Europe, Organon and Schering AG, are already sponsoring clinical trials of male birth control. Amid the gaggle of candidates in the recent California gubernatorial recall election, one man, Warren Farrell, the author of *Why Men Are the Way They Are*, actually made the creation of a male birth control pill the key plank in his campaign platform.

And so, the immortal question posed to Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*—"Why can't a woman be more like a man?"—might soon be partially made moot by Seasonale, and then turned on its head by men on the pill.