

# Catholic doctor says 'no more to birth control'

Lisa A. Johnston

When the birth control pill was introduced 50 years ago, the medical community revered it as a panacea. Over the years, it's been used to prevent pregnancy, treat medical conditions such as endometriosis and even help clear up acne.



But after two decades of using the birth control pill in his OB/GYN practice, one local Catholic doctor has said enough is enough.

Over the course of a year and a half, Dr. Richard Brennan has embarked on a journey that has opened his eyes to what his faith teaches about the use of artificial contraceptives. His wife and four children, especially his oldest

daughter, Amanda, were supportive of his decision. The Brennans attend St. Margaret Mary Alacoque Parish in Oakville and St. Ambrose Parish on the Hill.

Last fall, Brennan underwent training to learn the Creighton Model FertilityCare System, one of several methods of natural family planning, and its medical component, NaProTechnology. He also sent 3,200 letters to his patients, explaining that he was no longer going to prescribe the pill or other artificial methods of preventing pregnancy.

"The major impetus behind this decision is my desire to be totally pro-life in my recommendations and treatment," he wrote.

Through the support of many — his family, friends in the medical field, and others in the Catholic community — Brennan is convinced that God is giving him a second chance.

"You've got to think this doesn't happen by chance," he said.

## "The way we were trained"

After graduating from medical school at St. Louis University in 1986, Brennan entered into an internship and residency in obstetrics and gynecology at St. Louis University Group Hospitals. It was during his studies at the Catholic university that he was introduced to the birth control pill and how it could be used in his future as an OB/GYN.

At that time, "the pill was the way to go, and the only way to really practice OB/GYN," he explained. As a Catholic medical resident, "it was just the way we were trained. The pill was a panacea for everything. Once you're trained that's

the way to practice medicine, it's kind of hard to change."

Very few physicians at the time, including Catholic doctors, had gone against that grain. Brennan recalled an exception, Dr. Charlie Dahm, a Catholic doctor who at the time was a clinical professor in the Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology and Women's Health, who was known for promoting the Church's teachings in the field of medicine.

"Dr. Dahm was not the norm of what people were thinking at the time," Brennan said. "Looking back, I think maybe I failed myself by not listening."

Despite his initial decision to prescribe the pill, Brennan said he's never performed a sterilization procedure or inserted intrauterine devices in his patients. Even as a resident, he was questioned when he wouldn't "scrub in" to those kinds of procedures.

He justified his decision by looking at those methods as "more permanent," not as something that temporarily prevented ovulation, like the pill. "It was my way of saying, 'I'm Catholic,' but not taking the big step of not prescribing the pill."

The pill's ability to act as an abortifacient, or preventing a human embryo from implanting in a uterus, he said, is not emphasized by the drug companies or even medical school professors. "And years ago ... the pill was prescribed at a higher dose. Now with the real low-dose birth control pill, I think it's working more at preventing implantation a higher percentage of the time."

### **A wake-up call**

Before Brennan even considered changing the way he practiced, his wife, Katie, was being moved by the Holy Spirit. In January of 2008, she had attended a women's day of recollection at St. Louis University High School with a friend. The guest speaker was Patty Schneier, a local Catholic woman who has traveled around the country to speak on topics such as chastity, Pope John Paul II's "Theology of the Body" and other related subjects.

A large part of Schneier's talk focused on the Church's teaching on contraception, Katie Brennan recalled. Afterward, she spent the rest of the year researching the topic and internally questioning whether her husband should be prescribing contraceptives in his practice.

She consulted everyone she could think of: priests, women religious, doctors, laity. When asked, almost everyone told her that her husband's soul was in "grave danger."

"That summer, I was in agony," she said. One of the many she reached out to was Dr. Michael Dixon, a NFP-only OB/GYN based at St. Anthony's Medical Center in South County. "He said, 'This is all up to God.'" Around the same time, Msgr. Kevin McMahon, a former consultant for moral and religious matters related to health care and biotechnology in the archdiocese, was presenting a series of lectures to the Catholic Medical Association in St. Louis.

"Mike says to me, 'You have to get him to go to this,'" she recalled.

By the fall of 2008, Katie Brennan finally confronted her husband.

"He got so mad at me."

Asked what he was feeling after the confrontation, Brennan said, "After you've been doing something for 20 years, it's hard to change. She was challenging my way of how I was practicing medicine." The financial fallout was a consideration, too, but only from the standpoint of how he was going to provide for his wife and four children, including one in college and two in high school.

"You think, 'How am I going to make a living?' In the back of your mind, you worry about that. You worry about your own kids."

### **A "liberating" feeling**

At the same time, Brennan's oldest daughter, 19-year-old Amanda, also was worried about her father.

In the spring of 2009, as a senior at Cor Jesu Academy, Amanda Brennan wrote a paper for an advanced theology class. Her topic was on the truths of contraception and the Church's teachings on the subject. She consulted experts including Patty Schneier, Jason Evert, Christopher West and physicians.

"I knew I wanted to dig more into the Catholic faith. We learned about encyclicals, Pope Paul VI, 'Humanae Vitae,' and we started learning about Theology of the Body. For once, I found something that I actually enjoyed," she said.

She remembered having a conversation with her dad on the way home from a college visit. "On the ride home, I was working on my paper. And I said 'Dad, you've got to stop this.' He said, 'I know, but it's not that easy.' For me, it was really hard. I just wanted him to stop."

Amanda Brennan said she hopes women her age will see how "liberating" the Church's teaching on contraception really is. "I am convinced that this is right, and I'm going to live my life according to the teaching. I want people to know how awesome this is."

Her mom becomes tearful when she thinks how she missed out on NFP during her childbearing years.

"I am so grateful my girls are going to be able to use (NFP), because this has been a true pain for me."

### **Lasting effects**

Since Brennan wrote to his patients last November, he's been happy that he remains busy in his practice. He also practices with his two brothers, both of whom continue to prescribe the pill. He admitted that some of his family

members were surprised with his decision, "but it doesn't prevent me from continuing what I'm doing."

Last fall, Brennan traveled to the Pope Paul VI Institute in Omaha, Neb., to become certified as a Creighton Model medical consultant. He finished the second part of the training last month.

Brennan said the patients most affected by his conversion are the younger ones, those in their teens and 20s, who use the pill. He said it's been hard to see the record release requests that come across his desk. "After a while that starts to play on your mind," he said. "But then you start getting the people coming in who are doing Creighton Model, which is a positive reinforcement." He credited several hospitals for helping with referrals.

He's also invited Diane Daly, director of the archdiocesan Office of Natural Family Planning and a supervisor with the Department of Fertility Care Services at St. John's, to come speak to his staff about the Creighton Model. Several have begun charting as a result.

NFP, he said, "explains things better. Now that I'm doing Creighton (Model) I can see this patient who has premenstrual spotting — where before, I'd put them on the pill, I look at it in a different way now."

Katie Brennan is thrilled at the pure joy she sees in her husband.

"He'll say to me, 'I can't wait to see this patient, because she's has an infertility problem, and now I know how to help her.' Rick has always loved what he does, but I can see this renewed sense of enjoying it again."