

## Papa Is a Parent, Too

# How the March of Dimes Fights Birth Defects

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Since Biblical times, husbands have heaped coals of fire on wives whenever there was anything amiss with the children.

If Johnny was born with a shortened leg, the fault was obviously his mother's, for hadn't Johnny been an inseparable part of her during her nine months of pregnancy? Certainly no blame could be directed at the father, the male argued, because his role in creating Johnny had been minimal and fleeting.

Monarchies have been rocked because a Queen "failed" to produce a male heir. We all recall what happened to Catherine of Aragon when, in effect, Henry VIII of England charged her with willful neglect in refusing to bear him a male heir. Catherine didn't get beheaded, as did two of the King's helpmeets, but for her "sins" of omission she was ejected from the castle by means of divorce.

In our day, biology has made mincemeat of this male egotism. Among this century's discoveries about the male is that the sex of his offspring is determined by his sperm. At the moment of conception, the mother plays no part in the union of the two cells that determines whether, nine months later, she will present her lord and master with a boy or a girl.

Science has known this for more than half a century, but it is a fact still largely unknown to the man-in-the-street and his spouse.

Aside from supposed responsibility for the sex of their children, women are usually blamed for any birth defects that appear. Some psychiatrists say that women are inclined, secretly or otherwise, to accept that censure and in consequence to suffer from feelings of guilt.

Another frequent accusation is that many women continue



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bearing children long after they should. Columnists in our daily press, magazine writers, gynecologists and others join in a drumbeat of warnings to women against risking childbirth at age 35 or older. The reasons are mostly sound and include the increased incidence among these older mothers of mongoloid infants, those born with mental defects, and apparently achondroplasia (dwarfism), heart defects, and babies born smaller than usual.

What distresses me is that while on the distaff side there are many genetic and uterine studies, on the male side there are almost no investigations whatever. The National Foundation-March of Dimes, now combating birth defects after its successful campaign against polio, believes that more studies of the male role in procreation should be undertaken so that our picture in time may become less lopsided.

What about the father's age, particularly when he is 40 or over? A 15- or even 20-year differential is not highly uncommon between spouses nowadays. In relation to birth and birth defects, does the male's

sperm deteriorate or otherwise change after a given age? Is male age a factor even when the partners are about the same age? Some respected investigators think it may be.

We have fairly well-grounded suspicions today that the age of the father might not be the only factor involved in passing along defective characteristics to his children. It has already been established, for example, that even a young man can have a role in transmitting a familial form of mongolism. And recently, in Hawaii, I heard a medical paper that demonstrated that when the gene that causes club foot is present in pure Hawaiians, it is more often the male who carries it.

Oddly enough, papa also appears to be responsible exclusively for passing along excessively hairy ears seen among some natives of India and Ceylon. It is a reasonable assumption that, as our knowledge of chromosomes in the male increases, we will find more birth defects attributable to him.

The time has come for a long look at papa.