

Now, Another Pill Promises a Revolution

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By DAVID J. GARROW

FOR both medical and political reasons, the Food and Drug Administration's approval Thursday of the abortion drug mifepristone, or RU-486, is the most significant abortion-rights triumph since the Supreme Court's 1992 reaffirmation of *Roe v. Wade*.

Mifepristone's availability may in time not only make abortion more readily accessible to American women, but may also slowly and subtly alter the language in which abortion is debated politically.

Controlling the imagery of abortion may help sway millions of Americans who are in the middle of the bitter abortion debate. Since mifepristone is prescribed only in the first seven weeks of pregnancy, and early abortions are more palatable to many Americans, abortion-rights advocates hope they can use the drug to make abortion itself seem less morally troubling.

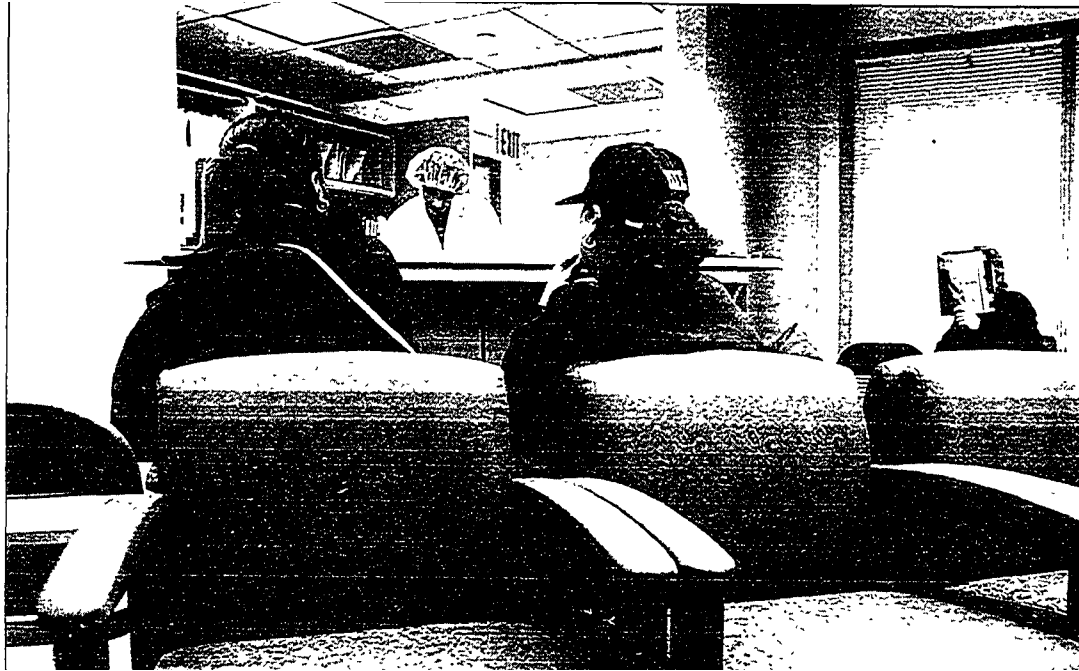
This will not happen tomorrow, however, despite declarations by both sides suggesting imminent triumph or disaster for their causes. Rather, if this pill creates a revolution, it will be a slow-rolling one.

As Carole Joffe, a sociologist and abortion-rights advocate at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, said after the F.D.A.'s announcement, "such changes as do occur will take place gradually, not overnight."

Indeed, it is possible that there will be no revolution at all.

Mifepristone-induced abortions are more time-consuming and potentially more difficult than the standard surgical procedure. Under the F.D.A.'s rules, a woman seeking a medical abortion by means of Mifeprex, as the drug will be called, will have to make three separate visits to a doctor over two weeks. And the drug must be used within the first 49 days of pregnancy, as certified by a doctor, since its effectiveness declines after that. Clinical trials, moreover, have shown that anywhere from 3 percent to 8 percent of women will need a surgical procedure after

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Andre I. Mohan/The New York Times

An abortion clinic waiting room. Abortions induced by the drug known as RU-486 take longer than the standard surgical procedure.

completing the program, either to complete the abortion or to stem excessive bleeding.

In comparison, a surgical abortion usually entails only one doctor's visit and rarely results in any prolonged discomfort.

Why then, does this F.D.A. decision seem so significant? One reason is that abortion-rights advocates predict that, over time, far more physicians will administer mifepristone than presently offer surgical abortion.

Beyond that, however, lies the fundamental question of how Americans regard abortion itself. Danco Laboratories, the company that is the exclusive distributor of Mifeprex (under license from the Population Council, which controls American rights to

the drug), is marketing it as "The Early Option Pill," which provides a "nonsurgical option to end early pregnancy." The word "abortion" never appears in the company's marketing and press materials.

Similarly, for more than two years, a television advertising campaign mounted by the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League in selected states under the title of "Choice for America" has also advanced the abortion-rights message without ever using the word itself.

Abortion-rights advocates have recognized for more than a decade that Americans are far more likely to embrace the idea that a woman has a right to choose whether

or not to have an abortion than they are to endorse abortion itself. But as the past five years of controversy over what abortion opponents call "partial-birth abortions" (an intact abortion procedure used for pregnancies of more than 15 weeks) has shown, Americans are also far more accepting of first-trimester (12 weeks or less) abortions than they are of later ones.

Overall, the two sides have fought more or less to a stalemate, which is one reason for the relatively low visibility of the abortion issue in this year's presidential campaign. George W. Bush has a lock on most anti-abortion voters, and Al Gore on most fervently abortion-rights ones, and so far

neither candidate has appeared especially eager to advertise his stance to an electorate where most undecided voters may view abortion from the murky middle.

Active campaigners on both sides of the abortion issue may hope that the F.D.A.'s order will force the candidates to devote more public attention to their views on women's reproductive rights, but neither campaign seems likely to respond.

For the future, however, the medical-abortion breakthrough gives abortion-rights advocates a chance to change the way abortion is spoken of, and hence regarded. The abortion pill will enable them to emphasize not only that 88 percent of abortions already take place within the first trimester, but that Mifeprex could help shift a significant number of those (over half occur during weeks eight through 12) to an even earlier stage of pregnancy.

This will seem like mere wordplay to committed abortion opponents, but then most Americans are somewhere in the middle of this fight, neither fully approving of abortion nor in favor of preventing women from having one, if they so choose.

Abortion opponents are already hard at work attempting to portray mifepristone as far more dangerous than either abortion rights advocates or the F.D.A. believe, but they likely will face a far more difficult struggle in campaigning against medical abortions than they have in targeting the "partial birth" ones.

Indeed, early in the crusade against that procedure, a few abortion opponents warned colleagues of the risk that demonizing one late-term procedure as especially awful would send an implicit message that early-term abortions were not so bad. Now abortion-rights forces, thanks to the F.D.A.'s ruling, are in an ideal situation to build upon and exploit that distinction.

Ultimately, advocates on both sides believe that Americans will move to the side that is able to shape how they perceive abortion itself.

If Danco and its abortion-rights allies can use Mifeprex to make early abortion less morally troubling to many Americans, then abortion-rights advocates will be on their way to scoring a greater victory than most observers yet realize.