

Chronicles of Brunonia

That '65 Business

Amy Karwoski

A scheming undercover reporter exposed Brown University Health Services for prescribing birth control in 1965. The ensuing scandal brought national attention to Brown's campus and sparked frank discourse about the sexual politics of the time.

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In 1965, Americans let out a collective gasp when the voice of reassurance, CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite, announced on air that 1,000,000 abortions had been performed illegally the previous year. He declared: "the conflict between law and reality has resulted in a national dilemma."¹

Media attention to the politics of sex contributed to this national dilemma as an increasing number of Americans questioned whether government should be allowed to influence intimate decisions about their bodies. Tension associated with a national sensitivity to shifting sexual mores was especially palpable in the sexually charged environment of colleges and universities. Parents, administrations and even some students feared the consequences of growing sexual liberation among the student body.

In 1963, students at four Ivy League schools, Princeton, Yale, Columbia, and Brown, staged loosely organized riots aimed at venting frustration over the conservative social policies perpetuated by their university administrations. These social policies aimed to control when, where and how male and female students interacted with one another both on and off campus. Princeton students, responsible for the first of these riots listed "sex" and "the responsible and mature enjoyment of which" as a reason for the uproar.² As 1,500 energetic participants rocked cars and set the town's train station on fire during a three-hour march, they loudly railed against an administration that they felt had effectively "outlawed" sex on campus. Columbia's "panty raid" on female dorms

failed to capture much attention, however, during a similar raid at Brown, several students were arrested for disorderly conduct and later tried in court. As punishment for the Brown riot, the university president banned all social functions for a year and tabled discussions related to relaxing the co-ed visitation rules on campus. Temporarily disempowered, a group of Brown's students were forced to get creative in the ongoing battle for increased social and sexual rights.

In September of 1965, when a nineteen-year-old Pembroke College student arrived at his office inquiring about birth control, Dr. Roswell Johnson proceeded with caution. Understanding that this was a sensitive matter, he carefully engaged the young woman in conversation, responding to her questions with his trademark professionalism and reassurance.³ Dr. Johnson—"Roz" to his friends and colleagues—had been employed by Brown University health services for two years and knew from experience that young co-eds were often reticent to talk about their sexual health, particularly with someone from the university administration.⁴ They were often anxious, uninformed, or victim to misinformation and rumors.

Johnson took the time to build a rapport with his patients in an effort to encourage frank dialogue about health issues. Although he looked the part of an aloof physician with thick, black, horn-rimmed glasses and meticulously parted graying hair, Johnson had won the respect of students and administration alike with his reputation for "wise counsel, sensitive understanding and insistence on truth."⁵ Then, in his mid-fifties and keenly aware that he likely resembled a father figure to many of his patients,

he made a conscious effort to resist the moralizing lectures that university doctors often felt obligated to bestow upon the youth in their charge.⁶

After interviewing this particular student, Johnson informed her that while he was “on her side,” in his medical opinion, she was just too young to take birth control.⁷ He explained that “the pill” been found to produce harmful side effects in young women, such as arresting long bone growth and it was his policy to avoid prescribing it to all women under the age of twenty-one. He did, however, offer to provide her with additional information about birth control, inviting her to speak with him again in a couple of years if she still wanted to pursue it as an option.⁸

Before she left his office, the student inquired about the university’s confidentiality policy, worried that her request for birth control would become part of her medical record.⁹ Dr. Johnson reassured her that the actual reason for her visit would not appear anywhere in her medical history. Instead, he would simply describe the purpose of their meeting as “conference,” a term he often used to protect sensitive information at the request of a patient.

A few hours later, Dr. Johnson was surprised when another student arrived at his office inquiring about birth control. This time, however, the interested party was a young man. It was not uncommon for male students to consult with him about contraception. In fact, Johnson received slightly more birth control related inquiries from male students than he did from females, perhaps because they felt more comfortable talking about sexual topics with someone of their own gender.

The student identified himself as Stephen Veiner, a reporter for the *Brown Daily Herald*.¹⁰ It quickly became clear to Johnson that he was not seeking medical advice, rather, confirmation on a scoop. Veiner cut straight to the point: “We keep hearing a nasty rumor that you prescribe birth-control pills.”¹¹

Dr. Johnson, caught off guard, confirmed that he had, indeed, written prescriptions for several young women over the course of the semester. He added that he was always willing to discuss various birth control methods with students “if someone asks.”¹² Johnson tried to engage Veiner in a discussion about the reasons why he wouldn’t prescribe birth control for girls younger than twenty-one, but the young reporter was more interested in learning about the Pembroke women who had obtained the pill on campus. How many were there? Were they married or single?

Dr. Johnson answered Veiner’s questions in a straightforward manner, unconvinced that this particular story would be shocking or even interesting to Brown students. Although Johnson did not publicize the fact that he had prescribed birth control to a few students, the practice was not inconsistent with Brown Health Service’s overall policy on sex education.¹³

During his tenure as the director of University Health Services, Johnson had made sexual education a focus in his work with both Brown and Pembroke students. He often visited student dormitories as part of a campaign to raise awareness about sexual health. During these informal presentations, he discussed birth control “without any holds barred.”¹⁴ He even made use of props like condoms, spermicidal foam and a diaphragm to better demonstrate the different options available. He also provided information on the pill to interested students.¹⁵ Although in some schools, this liberal

approach to talking about sex would have been highly controversial, the administrations of Brown and Pembroke had never interfered with the content of Dr. Johnson's popular curriculum.¹⁶

Early the next morning —September 28, 1965—Dr. Johnson received a phone call from Barnaby Conrad Keeney, Brown's president. Keeney had only one question for his Director of Health Services: "have you done anything illegal?"¹⁷

Keeney had just finished perusing that morning's special edition of the *Brown Daily Herald*, the front page of which featured a headshot of Dr. Johnson beneath the bolded headline: "Brown Health Center Prescribes Birth Control Pills." ¹⁸ The article, labeled "For Women at Pembroke College:" revealed that Brown University Health Services had prescribed birth control pills to several unmarried, undergraduate students at Pembroke College.

The same morning, the Pembroke student newspaper, the *Pembroke Record*, published a special "extra" edition as a companion to the *BDH* piece. The *Record* article, "Record Reporter Obtains Preventive Prescription," confirmed with dramatic flair that an undercover reporter had obtained a "tentative prescription" for birth control pills at Brown Health Services the previous day. The prescription was described as "tentative" as the student was not yet twenty-one, and had been refused a prescription "for the time being."¹⁹

Keeney quickly realized that he needed to cover his bases. People both inside and outside of Brown were taking notice of this developing story. If the administration decided to confirm the validity of the *BDH* report, they would become the first American

university to publically acknowledge that they had provided birth control to unmarried co-eds.

Within several hours, CBS and NBC television crews from New York descended on Brown's campus, jostling one another for key interviews. Early interest in the breaking story sent reporters across the country scrambling to uncover more information about the doctor who provided birth control to unmarried students. Meanwhile, their readers debated whether this practice signaled a trend of moral decay in the American higher education system.

Although it was Roswell Johnson who became the unwitting public face of this breaking national news story, at home within the Brown community, another figure quickly eclipsed Johnson as the scandal's real person of interest.

The articles in the *BDH* and the *Pembroke Record* were not published with the intention of discrediting Dr. Johnson and University Health Services. In fact, most students, including *BDH* reporters, approved of his liberal policies. As the campus birth control scandal unfolded, what seemed at first a critique of prescribing practices revealed itself as a calculated move in a larger scheme to expose the hypocrisy inherent in the "foggy foggy dew" of the university's current social policy. It quickly became clear that Johnson was simply early collateral damage in a targeted attack on another administrative official: Dean Rosemary Pierrel.

The same *BDH* article that exposed Dr. Johnson charged that the release of this information " must be judged as one of the darkest moments in the Pembroke Deanery tenure of Rosemary Pierrel," and that the real issue at hand "is not one of the advisability

of giving access to the pills,” it is “the attitude of the Pembroke Hall Administration toward the practice.”²⁰

Dean Pierrel, who had received her PhD from Brown in 1953, had served as Dean of the women’s college for four years. An accomplished social scientist in her own right, she was active in auditory discrimination research and taught courses in experimental psychology. She was best known for working on the Barnabus study, an experiment of “learning through reward and punishment in rats.”²¹

The social policy under Dean Pierrel at Pembroke during this time ranged from strict curfew rules to the “motel rule” which forbade students from staying overnight off campus unless they were under the direct supervision of their parents. Student newspaper reporters had a special bone to pick with the parietals rule, however.

The term parietals, derived from the Latin for “wall,” refers to the rules governing the visiting privileges of members of the opposite sex in college or university dormitories. For both women and men, this overarching social policy was perceived as a bit paradoxical. Dating and marriage were very much on the minds of the women of Pembroke in 1965—a preoccupation that was supported by the administration. Female students were directed to wear a skirt anytime they ventured over to Brown’s campus or on an outing downtown. They also received courses on posture and dinner etiquette.²² While marriage may have been the end goal for many Pembroke students [and perhaps Brown students], the parietals rule aimed to keep raging teen hormones at bay—at least while on campus—a feat that proved difficult to enforce. Ted Turner, the founder of CNN, was famously suspended from Brown in 1959 for “having a girl in [his] room.”²³

The articles in the *BDH* and *Pembroke Record* gave voice to the frustrations of students who felt the administration's policies were both archaic and two-faced. The revelation that the university had "condoned" sex outside of marriage by prescribing birth control pills to single women provided the ammunition needed to push their accusation of hypocrisy further. "Under what rationale do the college and the SGA [Student Government] judge and punish—even suspend—students for social offenses when it allows this type of undercover freedom?" Stephen Veiner wrote.²⁴

Although Pierrel was not wholly responsible for the application of the parieters policy, she was rumored to have exerted influence over Brown's decision to decrease the hours that male students could entertain female guests on campus. Her initial refusal to comment on the birth control controversy intensified the spotlight on her. President Keeney had already publically pledged his support to Dr. Johnson. Students waited eagerly to see if Pierrel would do the same. She took time to craft her response.

Her statement, published in the *Record* the next day, did little to satisfy students. While she refused to criticize the actions of University Health Services for what she deemed a "medical decision," she also fought back against the students who accused Pembroke as being "archaic and Victorian," claiming that their sister colleges and universities were decidedly more conservative. Indeed, in the media firestorm, Wellesley, Radcliffe, Harvard, Columbia, Berkeley, Michigan and the University of Pennsylvania all made public statements confirming that they refused to prescribe birth control to their students.²⁵ Pierrel also criticized the attack on Pembroke as sexist, claiming that "society views the way women should behave rather differently from the way that it views young men should behave."²⁶

Over the weeks that followed, the controversy continued to rage. While interested bystanders weighed in across the country, students voiced their opinions in the student newspapers. While some condoned news of the birth control prescriptions as “a necessary revelation,” others attacked the “sensationalism over a not particularly startling fact.” A small group of students became increasingly incensed as the administrations at both Brown and Pembroke made no move to reevaluate the social policy, refusing to acknowledge that hypocrisy existed.

After enduring two months of petitions, complaints and mudslinging, a beleaguered President Keeney fought back, using an upcoming freshman convocation as a platform to deliver a harsh word about campus communication. His speech was a direct response to a recent appeal made directly to the Corporation by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In their complaint, they charged the entire Brown administration—including the president and the deans—with a “lack of communication” regarding the movement to liberalize campus parietal rules.²⁷

Keeney took particular care to clarify the functions of both a university president and a Dean in his speech. “I see the Deans quite frequently, some of them every day” he began. “They tell me what they have in mind, and they usually tell me what other people have in mind.... the Deans, in effect, stand between the President and the students.”²⁸ He advised the students to “be kind to your Deans” as “generally speaking, the Deans are apt to have a more liberal point of view than the President, if only because they are likely to be younger, and to sympathize more with students, if only because they are more

thoroughly involved with them. Do not attempt to undermine their position between you and the President, but rather sympathize with them, for both of the layers between which they are ground can be very nasty indeed.”

Dean Pierrel, who remained largely silent during the breaking of this national news story, road out the storm for several years, clinging to Pembroke’s increasingly fragile mandate over students’ sexual relations. When she formally responded to her detractors with a written statement in November of 1968, she held firm to the convictions she expressed in her earlier statement, however she appeared more open to discussing the sexual politics of the time. “It has been argued that yours is a new generation with new ideas...there is nothing new about the idea of illicit sexual activity,” she concluded while reaffirming her support of the prevailing social policy.²⁹

Pierrel could hardly be blamed for her failure to foresee the full extent of the sexual revolution that would galvanize Americans over the next several years. There *was*, in fact, something new about the national public discourse in the wake of Brown’s birth control revelation. Other schools like the University of Minnesota soon followed their example, publically acknowledging that they, too, prescribe birth control to their students.³⁰

Brown University continued to appear at the forefront of the fight for increased sexual rights. One year after Dean Pierrel’s address, Brown became the first school in the Ivy League to offer co-educational housing on campus, when, in the fall of 1969, fifty-seven Pembroke freshmen moved into the top two floors of Diman House in the Wriston Quadrangle.³¹ At that time, the building featured separate entrances for males and

females. Other dormitories soon followed suit. In 1982, as the fire of the sexual revolution waned, Brown's President Swearer, during his annual *Hour with the President*, was asked the question, "Do co-ed dorms create problems or solve them?" to which he answered wryly, "I would have to say 'yes.'"³²

Years later, Dr. Roswell Johnson, the man who inadvertently planted the first seed of change, remembered 1965 as just another year on the job. In 1991 Dr. Johnson, then in his 80s, received a phone call from a Brown student requesting an interview about the "*Birth Control Scandal*." "Yeah right," he laughed, asking the student "where did this "scandal" ever come in? It was newsworthy, yeah, but there was no *scandal* attached to it in any way." Dr. Johnson then turned to his wife, who was standing beside him, and said, "I have a Brown student on the phone who wants to talk about that '65 business..."³³

¹ "Public Eye: Abortion in 1965," video available at <http://www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=3204142n>.

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 - 5 Speech given in honor of Dr. Roswell Johnson, given by LeClair Bissel, April 18, 1980.
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 - 28 Mitchell, Martha. "Deans." *Encyclopedia Brunoniana*. 1993.
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