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Obituary

Arie Haspels

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Champion of women's right to control their fertility and inventor of the "morning after" pill

Many agree that Arie Haspels, who died at the age of 87, was "the right man, at the right time, in the right place." This was certainly true for a woman who attended his surgery in 1964 after having been gang raped. It would be two decades before abortion was officially legal in the Netherlands, but, by treating the woman with oestrogen, Haspels prevented any pregnancy. Almost by accident the "morning after" (emergency contraceptive) pill was born. Haspels would go on to champion women's right to control their fertility, chiming with a sexual revolution that transformed a conservative Netherlands in the 1960s.

Born into a strict Protestant family near Rotterdam, Arie Haspels declared, at the age of 8, that he would become a medical missionary. After qualifying, he left for Indonesia and later Nigeria, where his views on contraception were forged as he experienced how multiple births simply led to children starving. He also became an expert in repairing obstetric fistulas caused by pregnancy trauma, a problem largely affecting developing countries that can leave women incontinent. In 1961 he returned to the Netherlands, gaining his doctoral thesis with research into uterine rupture among women in central Java.

By 1964 Haspels, with a growing reputation for open mindedness, was perhaps ready to embrace an unorthodox treatment of his raped woman patient. According to his colleague Peter Heintz, a professor of gynaecologic oncology: “Haspels always chose the side of women with problems who wanted contraception, while others didn’t.” Although research was being carried out simultaneously in the US, it was Haspels who prescribed the first emergency contraceptive pill.

Controversy ensued, but Haspels proceeded, undeterred, to research dose and develop a pill that could end pregnancy up to 72 hours after conception. Heintz recalled: “Once the effect was clear, Haspels started to promote the pill to prevent unwanted pregnancies. In those days that was quite revolutionary. It has helped many women in protecting themselves from an unwanted pregnancy and illegal abortions.”

By now his advocacy of contraception and abortion rights placed him in the zeitgeist of sexual revolution and women’s liberation. The contraceptive pill, manufactured by the Dutch firm Organon, was marketed in 1964, followed by Pope Paul VI’s rejection of all artificial birth control in 1968. Women proclaiming “Baas in Eigen Buik [boss in (my) own belly],” across their bared abdomens, demonstrated outside meetings of the Dutch Society for Obstetrics and Gynaecology.

Haspels argued that neither pastor nor doctor should decide family planning, but that that decision lay with couples themselves. When in 1968 he was set to become professor at Utrecht University he was publically, but unsuccessfully, opposed for his controversial views by his conservative predecessor and 130 other gynaecologists. The university hospital in Utrecht, where Haspels worked, and its progressive twin at Leiden opened some of the first contraception clinics. Professor Heintz believes that, together with colleagues in Amsterdam and Leiden, Haspels represented a new wave of gynaecological thinking among university medical faculties: “His teaching and ongoing research stimulated the thinking of many young doctors. It was all part of a big wave of change in society. Women knew that this generation of gynaecologists was on their side.”

One of the new wave, gynaecologist Ineke van Seumeren first met Haspels by simply booking herself into his surgery to seek his career advice. She later worked in his clinic and recalls a decade of enormous change, where the sudden freedom to talk about sexuality was combined with a method of controlling one’s fertility: “Haspels was perfectly suited to this. He gave enormous support for women’s emancipation.”

Haspels was equally at home among the Dutch elite. He became obstetrician to the Dutch Royal family, attending the birth of Queen Beatrix’s third son, Constantijn, and helped establish the AMREF Flying Doctors, an African medical aid organisation with Beatrix’s father, Prince Bernhard. He was comfortable too with the popular media, reaching a wider audience through women’s magazines, thus creating a demand among women for a contraceptive pill that used a lower dose of oestrogen.

His fame did not keep him from treating non-famous women. He collaborated for decades with Eileen Engels, a nurse specialising in the treatment of postnatal depression. They appeared on television together, and he coauthored her research paper on accepting referrals in emergency cases when local GPs refused. He helped her, she believes, because he was always one to challenge “sacred cows,” and even today taboos remain around such issues as postnatal depression.

Nor did he neglect the developing world. Jacqueline Lampe, director of the AMREF Flying Doctors, first met Haspels in 2004 when, almost 80 years old and affected by Parkinson's disease, he was still visiting projects in east Africa to offer follow-up care to women who had undergone fistula repair. He remained "driven by a passionate desire to address injustice among vulnerable African women," she says, and to promote contraception.

Professor Heintz believes that Haspels contributed to the Netherlands enjoying the lowest levels of abortion and unwanted pregnancy in Europe today by normalising contraception and then motivating young people to use it. He was "one of the most important opinion makers in the area of contraception and abortion."

Professor Haspels died after having Parkinson's disease for many years. Predeceased by his second wife and a daughter, he leaves his wife, Cécile Haspels-Kenter; a former wife; and four children.

Notes

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Footnotes

- Professor in obstetrics and gynaecology Utrecht University (b 1925; q Amsterdam 1954), died on 30 December 2012.

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