

BIRTH CONTROL

Branded by critics as eugenics by the back door, a US-based project will soon be paying British drug users to stop having babies. Diane Taylor investigates

Nazism, eugenics and exploitation of vulnerable women are just a few of the things American grandmother Barbara Harris has been accused of because she pays drug users to stop having babies. But she doesn't flinch at these less than flattering labels and is so convinced about the justness of her cause that she is exporting her controversial programme to the UK. All that matters to her, she says, is making sure that innocent babies don't suffer needlessly with mothers who don't look after them properly.

Harris, based in North Carolina, is the founder of Project Prevention, a controversial US programme which pays predominantly female drug addicts £200 to use long-term contraception or to undergo sterilisation. To date more than 3,000 US women have opted for the sterilisation/long-term contraception for cash option, along with 29 men.

Harris, 57, decided that the UK was fertile recruiting ground after she claims she was deluged with e-mails following an interview in February with Fergal Keane on BBC Radio 4's *Taking A Stand*. She has received £13,000 from an anonymous businessman to help her set up her organisation here.

"I received over 400 emails after that programme, all but one of them positive, telling me that this is a great idea and that I should come to the UK," she says. "Women's rights organisations and drug treatment programmes don't want it for the most part, but ordinary citizens get what I'm doing and say they're excited that I'm coming here."

She says that while the media focuses on the sterilisation aspect of her programme it is up to the women who approach her to choose whether they want to use long-term contraception, such as intrauterine devices (IUDs), also known as 'the coil', contraceptive implants or sterilisation. To date two thirds of US

women have chosen the former option. She adds that views about whether or not she is doing the right thing morally boil down to 'which side your heart is on': the women's side, or the children's side. For her, supporting both is not an option although she says she has helped some women get into drug treatment programmes.

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Arguments rage about the rights of drug-using parents and would-be parents versus the rights of children who may suffer as a result of their parents' drug use. Although she is coming from the opposite side to anti-abortionists, like them she places the rights of the child above those of the mother. Anti-abortionists argue for the right of the child to be born while she argues for the right of the child not to be born.

British lawyer Sara Stocks is hoping to carry the Project Prevention torch in the UK. She is doing media interviews about the new scheme, has set up a freephone helpline (although calls are currently dealt with in the US office of Project Prevention) and is hoping to get Project Prevention registered as a charity here as quickly as possible.

"We've already received a couple of calls requesting sterilisations," says Stocks. She previously lived in the US and worked in the Massachusetts juvenile court system. She now lives in Bristol, has three biological children and has adopted three US children of drug-using parents.

She says that some of the US components of Project Prevention may be modified to allay concerns expressed here, especially around sterilisation.

"Personally I don't have any moral or ethical issues with Project Prevention as it stands. I'm committed to the aims of preventing the births of children who are going to suffer. There are no organisations in this country advocating for these children specifically. The reality is that there are thousands of babies born addicted to drugs and affected by alcohol and they are more likely to end up in care.

"The big issue here is sterilisation. That hasn't created the kind of furore in the US that it has generated here. We wouldn't be offering sterilisation to young women with no children. IUDs or contraceptive implants would be more suitable in those cases, but that would be a matter for the woman and her GP."

She said Project Prevention has been in discussions with drugs workers and children and young people's managers in social services departments and are hoping to launch pilot schemes in various parts of the UK.

Some may find Harris' and Stocks' arguments appealing. It is not in doubt that drug use by a pregnant woman can cause harm to a foetus and that some parents who use drugs are unable to look after their children properly. And the UK statistics do not make cheerful reading. According to research by the *Independent on Sunday*, between 2007-2008, 1,230 babies suffered withdrawal symptoms as a result of their mothers' drug use, a 67 per cent increase in a decade.

A 2004 Joseph Rowntree Foundation report into parental substance misuse estimates that there are between 250,000 and 350,000 dependent children living with parental drug misuse, and 920,000 living with parental alcohol misuse.

However, these statistics don't tell the whole story. Many pregnant women who are using opiates are under the care of specialist doctors and midwives who have helped them to stabilise their drug use during their pregnancy with a view to further stabilising, reducing or quitting drugs following the birth. For many drug-using pregnant women, having a baby is the incentive they need to give up drugs, although it can be dangerous for the foetus if the mother goes 'cold turkey' during the pregnancy.

While some parents are unable to care for their children properly because of their drug habit, others go to great lengths to conceal their drug use from their children and over-compensate in their parenting. Problematic drug and alcohol use are often factors in the removal of children from parents, but there are often other factors too and drug use may be a symptom of deeper problems that prevent good parenting. And of course there are many lousy parents who don't use drugs and alcohol.

Harris's plan to set up shop in the UK has brought a flurry of condemnation from drugs organisations here. They argue that long-term contraception is already available on the NHS and that drug treatment services already offer advice about contraception and sexual and reproductive health.

Addaction has labelled the scheme 'morally reprehensible'. DrugScope said Project Prevention was an 'exploitative measure' and David Liddell, director of the Scottish Drugs Forum, said: "The aim of reducing pregnancies is one we would all support, but I would utterly condemn the means by which they aim to achieve this."

"The whole idea of this being about protecting children or saving money is an absolute con," Mike Linnell, Head of Communications at Lifeline, said. "This is eugenics and I don't think it has any place in a civilised society or in this country."

Linnell has expressed concern about the reaction of various talk show hosts to criticism of Project Prevention, with one high-profile presenter labelling him an 'extremist'.

"No-one's arguing there's not a problem with pregnancy and drug use but some of the media reaction shocked me," he said. "They didn't actually call me a baby killer, but it wasn't far from it. The way they portrayed it was that this women cared about these babies and I was cast as this bloke protecting these evil monsters."

Others within the drug sector stopped short of condemning all of Project Prevention's methods. Professor Neil

McKeganey, of Glasgow University's Centre for Drug Misuse Research, said the sterilisation of drug-using women was morally wrong, but felt there was some merit in adopting a policy of paying such women to take long-term contraception – a view he previously voiced in 2005.

"When it comes to 'balancing' the responsibilities and rights of parents with the welfare of children, the issues and contexts can of course be complex," said Martin Barnes, DrugScope's Chief Executive. "The welfare of children is paramount. It is a fundamental principle enshrined in legislation that should be the bedrock of policy and practice.

"But we should be questioning of moral judgments, simplifications, prejudices or claims to wisdom or righteousness, not least when the parents or potential parents are problem drug users. By offering cash to female drug users to get themselves sterilised or use 'long-term contraception', Project Prevention takes an exploitative approach with an already vulnerable group.

"Using cash incentives to deny women the chance of motherhood is highly questionable and can undermine the recovery process once they have overcome addiction. For many women, becoming a mother can be a life-changing experience which can motivate them to seek help for their addiction and other problems.

"Potential parents," added Barnes, "can be involved in all sorts of risky behaviours that may raise question marks over their suitability for parenthood. But where should the line be drawn – women who drink, women who smoke, women with mental health problems, women who themselves have been the victim of abuse? All of these factors could impact negatively on the future development and welfare of a child.

"The issue of babies born suffering from withdrawal symptoms is rightfully concerning and emotive. But in terms of clinical evidence, babies can be effectively managed in post-natal care and maternal drug use of itself need not adversely effect child development.

"Unlike the United States, we have a health and social care system which all UK citizens, irrespective of income, can access. So the transatlantic contexts are different. Social services should, and do, work with related agencies to assess the risk posed to both child and mother, and take appropriate action. Putting effective child safeguarding and welfare procedures in place is the best approach – not sterilisation for cash based on misguided morality."

■ Diane Taylor is a freelance journalist

DRUGS QUOTE

"I won't be doing that, but thank you."

David Cameron's response to a suggestion from addiction lecturer Dr Axel Klein during a chance meeting on a train, that if in power he should legalise cannabis 'to bring the country forward'.

"One male respondent stated that he was 69 and that he had taken 'bubbles' in chocolate form of an Aero. I have discounted this."

From a Tayside Police Drug Intelligence Unit survey of mephedrone users.

"I have some idea of the pressure of finding your own identity with a famous father. I'm not sure I can comprehend it with two generations to deal with."

Movie star Michael Douglas, the grandson of screen legend Kirk, defending 31-year-old drug dealing son Cameron, who was handed half the minimum sentence by a New York judge.

"You got any food? There's food about if you want some. Get me a one-and-one."

Portsmouth dealer Emmanuel Okubote claimed a coded message on his phone asking for drugs was in fact an order for some jerk chicken, dumplings and rice.

"They get to connect with a 1200 lb animal. That's power... a good spiritual power too."

Gary Troxell, an equine assistance psychotherapist at Malibu-based rehab Promises, on the value of equine therapy.