Influence of Abortion Critics
Barring Sale of Drug in U.S.

By GINA KOLATA

While a new abortion-inducing drug is expected to be sold in France, China, England and other countries, opponents of abortion are blocking sale of the drug in this country.

The fate of the drug, RU 486, which has a potential for other medical conditions, mostly affecting women, is focusing new attention on the influence of the anti-abortion movement on medical decisions.

National Right to Life and other groups opposed to abortion have served notice to drug companies that if any company sold an abortion-inducing drug the millions of Americans who oppose abortion will boycott all the company's products. This happened to the Upjohn Company of Kalamazoo, Mich., when it tried to develop abortion-inducing drugs several years ago.

Pharmaceutical companies say they have no plans to seek Food and Drug Administration approval that is necessary to sell abortion-inducing drugs in the United States. They say publicly that they are not cowed by the anti-abortion movement and that they had other reasons for not selling such drugs. Privately, however, drug makers speak differently.

"The reasons are obvious," said one company executive who asked not to be named. He said his company feared that if it sold such a drug, it would suffer greatly from a boycott by the millions of members of National Right to Life and by "all the physicians, pharmacists and lay people who don't believe in abortions."

"We don't want to get into it," he said.

Hoechst-Roussel Pharmaceuticals Inc. of Somerville, N.J., holds the option rights to apply for Government approval to market RU 486 in this country, but it has declined to do so.

"We're not in that business," said Dr. Victor J. Bauer, executive vice president. Hoechst-Roussel is part of the Hoechst Celanese Corporation, a wholly owned subsidiary of Hoechst AG of West Germany. Hoechst Celanese makes chemicals, fibers, plastics and printing materials as well as a variety of drugs and, according to Standard & Poor's Register of Corporations, has annual sales of $1.7 billion.

Sterling Drug Inc., which is testing a similar drug in Europe, says it, too, had no plans to sell its drug in this country.

In combination with an existing drug, prostaglandins, RU 486 is safer than surgical abortion early in pregnancy and is so effective that experts predict that where it is available it may nearly replace surgical abortion in the first trimester.

"The drug is expected to be approved for sale in France and China in March, with marketing expected within a year in other countries, including Sweden, the Netherlands and England.

Experts said RU 486 or a similar drug might eventually enter the United States under another guise. Researchers are studying it for widening the opening of the birth canal, which may enable many women to avoid Cesarian births, and treating some forms of breast cancer and endometriosis, a leading cause of infertility.

"Our basic position is that death drugs designed to kill unborn babies have no place in America," he said.

The power of anti-abortion groups "is very upsetting," said Dr. Irving Spitz, director of clinical research at the Population Council in New York City. Dr. Daniel Mishell, professor and chairman of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Southern California School of Medicine, said he thought it was "medically wrong" that RU 486 would not be available to women in this country.

Dr. Mishell has just completed a three-year study of RU 486, paid for by the Population Council, which is a private group. By law, Federal funds cannot be used to support research on abortion, and Dr. Mishell's study is the only American study of the drug.

Dr. Spitz said, "Because of the possible political backlash, we have kept a low profile," adding: "We have not really encouraged studies in this country. We feel that our hands are tied. It's a question of political realities."

Abortion Picture Could Change

Experts said that if women in this country did start using the two-drug combination, RU 486 and prostaglandins, the whole abortion picture would change. Because the vast majority of abortions are performed in the first trimester of pregnancy, abortion clinics could be put out of business.

Having an abortion could mean obtaining and filling a prescription, not undergoing surgery. According to Dr. José Barzelatto, director of the World Health Organization's human reproduction program, the cost would be less, though it is not clear yet how much less, than surgical abortion.

"Abortions would become private," said Dr. Mishell. "It definitely would be easier to have an abortion."

It could also be more emotionally dif-
The Promise For Other Uses

RU 486 has other potential medical uses, but they are years away from the clinical testing that precedes marketing decisions. The drug “has seven or eight other medical indications that have nothing to do with abortions,” said Dr. Gary Hodgen, who is scientific director of the Jones Institute for Reproductive Medicine at Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk.

For example, Dr. Hodgen said, RU 486 dilates the cervix. It and similar compounds now being developed by several companies, including the Roussel-Uclaf Company of France, the developer of RU 486, are “unique drugs,” Dr. Hodgen said. They can be very useful in treating the uterine cramps of the leading cause of infertility in the United States. Women with endometriosis have uterine tissue outside the uterus; RU 486 may cause the tissue to shrink.

In addition, the drugs could prove useful in treating certain breast cancers that grow in response to sex hormones. Initial tests are promising, according to Dr. Hodgen.

The drugs also seem very promising in treating endometriosis, the third leading cause of infertility in the United States. Women with endometriosis have uterine tissue outside the uterus; RU 486 may cause the tissue to shrink.

Another possible use is in the treatment of Cushings syndrome, a hormonal disorder in both men and women that is now treated by removing the adrenal glands. RU 486 could also be developed as a morning-after pill, which if taken very soon after intercourse, would prevent a fertilized egg from implanting in the uterine lining to start a pregnancy.

Dr. Hodgen is concerned that the abortion issue will preclude marketing RU 486, even for the uses that have nothing to do with stopping or preventing pregnancy. “Groups that oppose abortions will oppose the marketing of this drug, even if the drug cured the common cold,” he said. “Let’s be real about that.”

Dr. Hodgen added that the emergence of RU 486 is a new issue for American society. If a drug can provide so many benefits, should it be kept off the market because it also can induce abortions? “We have to weigh risks and benefits of a social nature,” he said.