

AN INTERNATIONALLY COLLABORATIVE
RESEARCH PROJECT IN PARTNERSHIP
WITH PATIENT GROUPS

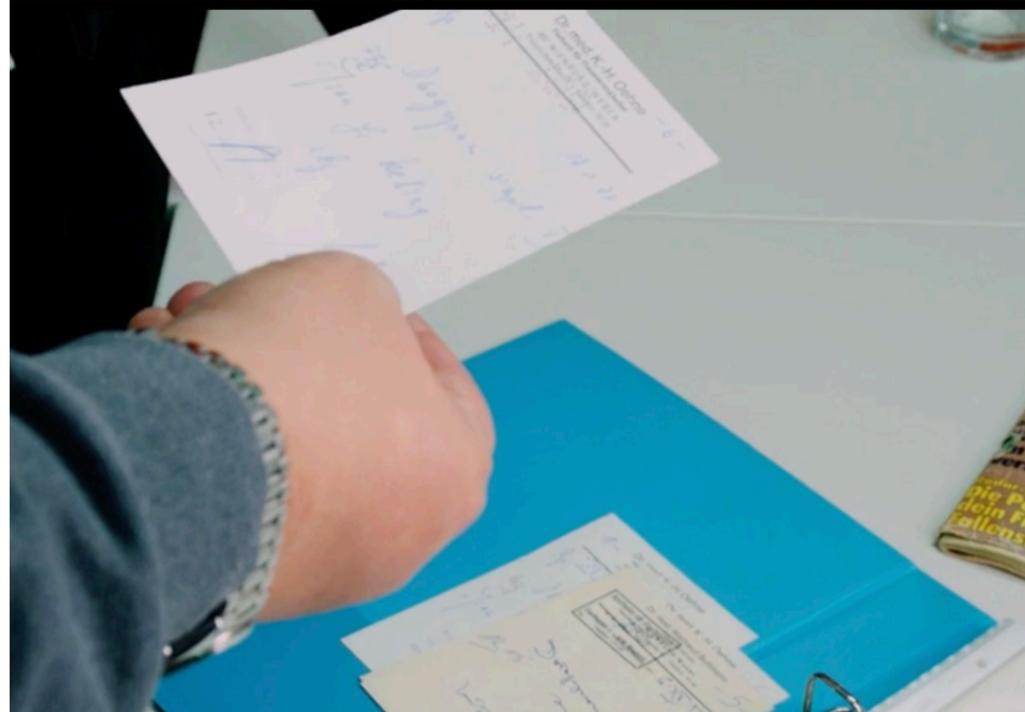
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Risky Hormones

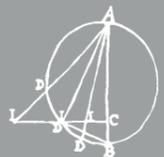
This project examines, in collaboration with patient groups, the rise and fall of Primodos and other hormone pregnancy tests (HPTs).

Today it may be difficult to believe that doctors ever prescribed pills as pregnancy tests. However, between the 1950s and 1980s, millions of women worldwide were given HPTs: diagnostic drugs that ruled out gestation by inducing menstrual-like bleeding (a 'negative' result; no bleeding implied pregnancy). HPTs were first marketed by the West German pharmaceutical company Schering AG (now Bayer) in 1950. Compositionally similar to oral contraceptives, they prefigured 'the pill' by about a decade.

Starting in 1967, HPTs came under suspicion; initially for causing spina bifida and then for inducing miscarriage and a range of birth defects akin to those caused by thalidomide, the notorious sedative that was also used to treat morning sickness. In 1978, the British and West German parents of malformed children whose mothers had taken HPTs while pregnant organised to take legal action against Schering. Although HPTs have not been available for decades, new archival findings and scientific evidence have revitalised long dormant patient-led campaigns in Britain and Germany. Against a backdrop of persistent media interest, continuing scientific research, and resumed litigation, our project will cut through the polemic to produce at a subtler, more nuanced historical understanding of HPTs. It will also seek to better understand the West German origins of oral contraception as well as international debates over the use and regulation of drugs in pregnancy and the spectre of birth defects after thalidomide.



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