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Playing into the hands of predators

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Contraceptive implants make children more vulnerable to sexual abuse, writes Melinda Tankard Reist

THE insertion of long-acting, potentially dangerous hormonal contraceptives into the bodies of young indigenous girls does not protect them from sexual abuse. It actually sets them up for greater exploitation.

The practice raises profound questions about the health and safety of very vulnerable girls living on society's margins. No one in authority can say exactly how many have been fitted with the implant, which has significant side effects, including prolonged bleeding. Who is monitoring this?

Queensland Health acting chief health officer Linda Selvey said the implants were deemed necessary where a girl's decision-making process was impaired and they couldn't make informed decisions about their sexual behaviour.

If they can't make informed decisions about their sexual behaviour then they are at even greater risk of coerced sex. A quick contraceptive fix does nothing to stop men who see an opportunity for easy sex with pre-teen girls who don't comprehend the meaning of consent. In fact, it may serve to encourage them.

In January, a 52-year-old Aboriginal health worker was sentenced to three years in prison for sexually abusing two girls aged 14 and 15. He'd taken the youngest to the local clinic to have Implanon inserted before he started sexually abusing her.

In January, it was also reported that Queensland welfare workers were unable to find a 13-year-old indigenous multiple-rape victim who was deaf and suffered cerebral palsy. The girl, who had three STDs, had been given contraceptive injections when she was 12. She was raped with impunity.

Of course, no one thinks pregnancy in young girls is a good thing. But this approach sets girls up to be repeatedly raped and abused because nothing is done to address the wider issue. Health authorities are inadvertently clearing the way for girls to be abused -- and affected by sexually transmitted infections which Implanon does not prevent.

Child Safety Minister Margaret Keech said accessing contraception was not always an indication that a child was being harmed or was at risk of harm. But how many 12-year-old daughters of government officials are walking around with Implanon in their arms? Do they view their own pre-teen daughters as informed sexual agents?

This is not about freedom of sexual expression. It's about branding girls for sex.

Some have argued that indigenous girls mature earlier. It's more likely that, living in dysfunctional communities riddled with pornography, alcohol and violence, they are primed for sex at ages considered unacceptable in the white community. But signs of puberty are hardly an indication that a girl is emotionally ready for sex.

Queensland Health has admitted it doesn't report all cases of sexual abuse. Where is the duty of care to these children? A synthetic progesterone rod shoved in their arms and that's it? What is the Child Safety Department actually for?

Justice Stephen Southwood recently said the abuse of young girls was prevalent in remote communities and needed to be stopped. "Young girls are entitled to be safe and to live with their mental integrity and dignity unharmed," he said.

Temporarily sterilising girls without addressing exploitation is hardly dignified.

Why are girls left so unprotected? Why aren't they removed? Are we so inured to unrelenting reports of the sexual abuse of young indigenous girls that we have stopped caring? Sexual victimisation has to be stopped. There needs to be an inquiry, now.

Melinda Tankard Reist is the director of Women's Forum Australia.

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