

Turning Japanese

Wondering what to take on your next trip to Japan? Make sure you've packed an industrial supply of oral contraceptives—they're illegal over there. But come October, the Japanese government—which has been thoroughly deliberating on the issue of legalizing the low dose pill (if you think that 34 years of deliberation is thorough, that is)—has finally come through and promised to approve this popular drug.

Japanese women are taking the decision with mixed feelings. Campaigners—who were understandably furious when Viagra was rubber-stamped within 6 weeks—welcomed the news, but added that the ministry had a lot of apologizing to do for misleading the public about the pill's safety and side-effects. Over the years of debate, concerns were voiced that the contraceptive would promote promiscuity, lead to a spread of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and even add to the problem of environmental hormones, believed to be the cause of low sperm count in Japanese men.

Demand is not expected to be high, as many women are reluctant to use the pill because of the bad press it has received. The unspoken word is that delays in legalization have protected the lucrative abortion business. Others attribute the government's long reluctance to nationalist concerns about boosting the population. Whatever the case, with the birth control pill about to be approved, Japanese women may very well be asking themselves, "What next? Mini skirts?" —Bella Katz, Tokyo correspondent

Skyrockets In Flight

As reported by Salon.com, an April flight between Roa and London was re-routed to Bombay after some crew members became worried that a carry-on bag might contain a bomb. It took a pack of bomb experts boarding the plane and examining the bag to conclude that the "suspicious" item was nothing more than a battery-operated vibrator. Talk about explosive devices! —Celina Hex



Breast Defense

Imagine that you're nineteen. You meet a boy at church, you start dating, you discover you're pregnant. When you tell him, he gets mad. "I don't want to sit around with a bunch of fat women with pillows huffy and puffy at Lamaze class," he says, then dumps you mid-pregnancy for another girl who is also pregnant with his child.

That's what happened to Tabitha Walrond, only it got worse. Tabitha, a doting mother who breastfed her son on a regular schedule, now may do jail time for "criminally negligent" homicide in his death from malnourishment. Tyler Walrond died in Tabitha's arms in a taxi on the way to the hospital. He had starved to death at only two months old.

Tabitha, who is on public assistance, had tried to get Tyler a doctor's appointment. Twice he was refused medical treatment because he didn't yet have a Medicaid card. [It arrived in the mail two months after his death.] In court, lawyers claimed that it would have cost doctors only \$15 to see the baby anyway, but they refused, even though one noted that at five weeks old, Tyler looked thin.

Defense lawyers suggested that a breast-reduction surgery at age fifteen (she had been a 42G) may have rendered Tabitha unfit to breastfeed, yet doctors at the time told her otherwise. And the jury who convicted Tabitha judged that she should have been aware that her breast milk was not providing enough sustenance.

But how could she have known? "Breast is best," a mantra Tabitha repeated in court, figured prominently in the magazines that she read while pregnant. Family, friends, doctors, and the media alike attested to its benefits and ease. That this "womanly art" is actually a potentially difficult physical process was obscured from Tabitha, whose access to medical support and informative advice was so limited that it cost her her baby's life. Plummeting through all safety nets, she not only lost her son but now, depending on the outcome of her sentencing, may spend time in jail.

—Hillary Chute