DES Was Prescribed After 1971

Those Exposed Despite FDA Warning Are Often Not Believed

By Fran Howell

Things were going incredibly well for 30-year-old Shannon Phillips in March 2003. She had just celebrated her birthday, had moved into her own apartment, and started dating a wonderful guy who eventually became her husband.

So there was no real concern when, during a routine pelvic exam, her doctor removed a cervical polyp and biopsied it. But when he called with the results, Phillips remembers that, “even he sounded surprised.” She had clear cell adenocarcinoma (CCA) of the cervix.

That led her to an Internet search where she first learned about DES. But Phillips was born in 1973 and everything she read said that in the United States the FDA banned DES in 1971. Was that true?

Her suspicions were aroused when her mother called the doctor’s office for her records and was told it should not be a problem. But, when the receptionist returned to the line, her demeanor changed to cold and perfunctory as she reported the records were not available after all.

Phillips’ mother had been prescribed prenatal vitamins. The hysterectomy revealed that Phillips also had a T-shaped uterus. It was starting to add up — except for her birth date of 1973.

According to Dr. Ken Noller, Professor and Chair of Obstetrics and Gynecology at Tufts University, there are, without a doubt, DES Daughters and Sons who were born after 1971. “As you know, the FDA did not ban DES. Rather, it was contraindicated for use in pregnancy,” he says. “Some doctors in 1972 and 1973 may simply not have gotten the message.”

But then there were others who egregiously continued prescribing DES into the early 1980s, knowing full well they were going against the FDA’s recommendation. Noller gets noticeably angry, even 20 years later, when he recalls a conversation with a North Dakota doctor, who arrogantly told him that DES worked (not true) with his patients for 40 years and that he was still prescribing it because it did no harm.

The reason Noller made the call to the doctor was because he had just seen a teenaged DES Daughter in his office who had been born in the mid-1970’s. Her mother had seen that doctor for her obstetric care.

“Fortunately, it was a rare case, but I am sure there were other U.S. doctors who thought they knew more than the FDA and ignored the warnings,” Noller says. “Luckily, by 1971 most doctors had already switched to other problem pregnancy protocols and DES use had significantly tapered off by then.”

DES was included in prenatal vitamin formulations, and it is possible supplies with the drug in them were prescribed after 1971, until they ran out.

Dealing with a rare cancer was difficult enough, but for Phillips, having doctors tell her she cannot be a DES Daughter, because she was “born too late,” is unbelievably frustrating. It adds insult to injury. “I want to scream at them but that just reinforces their belief that it is all in my head,” she says. “It is humiliating.”

Dr. Noller understands and is realistic enough to recognize that some doctors will just refuse to listen. His advice for all who were exposed to DES, whether before or after 1971, is to stay informed. “Know the health screenings you need and advocate for them.” He adds, “Those born after 1971 should attempt to get their mother’s medical records. They could possibly still be around.”

While not available in her case, Phillips says, “the diagnosis of CCA, along with her T-shaped uterus, leave no doubt I am a DES Daughter — now cancer-free for six years. But in the future, perhaps my doctors will not so readily dismiss and humiliate other women who tell them they are DES Daughters born after 1971. We are out there and should be believed.”

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