

Rutgers scholar authors definitive biography of reproductive medicine pioneer

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As Louise Brown – the first baby conceived by in vitro fertilization – celebrates her 30th birthday in 2008, a new book coauthored by a Rutgers medical historian offers the first comprehensive insight into the influence of John Rock, the Harvard-affiliated gynecologist and pioneering researcher, in shaping the field of modern reproductive medicine.

Rock was the first researcher to fertilize a human egg in vitro in the 1940s and the co-developer of the first oral contraceptive a decade later. His groundbreaking studies of the human embryo, tracing the path from ovulation to implantation in the uterus, provided the first visual record of the earliest stages of pregnancy.

A new book by Margaret Marsh, distinguished professor of history and interim chancellor at Rutgers University—Camden, and her sister, Wanda Ronner, a clinical associate professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, closely examines Rock's 50-year career. His work defined the reproductive revolution, with its twin symbols of the birth control pill and technologically assisted reproduction.

Their collaboration, "The Fertility Doctor: John Rock and the Reproductive Revolution" (John Hopkins University Press, 2008), is the first full-scale historical biography of Rock, who began his working life as a time-keeper on a banana plantation in Guatemala, later became the nation's leading figure in the treatment of infertility, and ended his

career as perhaps the world's most recognized advocate for the birth control pill.

"He was the leading clinician in the field of reproductive medicine before the field even had a name," Marsh explains. "We were fascinated by him. We thought he deserved a serious biography."

The authors found Rock's personal story compelling as well. In the 1930s, he was the only Catholic doctor in Massachusetts to support the repeal of a Massachusetts law that prohibited the use of birth control even by married couples. In the 1950s, he joined forces with biologist Gregory Pincus to develop the first oral contraceptive.

Marsh and Ronner were the first scholars to examine Rock's personal family papers, which included diaries, patient records, and correspondence with men and women from all walks of life around the nation and throughout the world. Rock's daughter, Rachel Achenbach, granted them unrestricted access to these documents.

"What I found so interesting about him was his willingness to try to find answers to medical questions that at the time, were so out of his reach," Ronner says. "He was doing experiments in his office. And he would do things like inject himself with the solvents that drug companies were using for treatments such as injectable progesterone, and report back on whether he'd had a reaction."

As director of the Harvard-affiliated Fertility and Endocrine Clinic at the Free Hospital for Women in Boston, Rock treated women from all walks of life, from film stars to at least one African princess, to the wives of elevator operators and laborers. He stands out, the authors say, for his ability to communicate with patients.

"He was absolutely in partnership with his patients. He always discussed

their conditions and treatment options with them, and he trusted their intelligence and decision-making ability," Marsh says. "He was ahead of his time in seeking informed consent."

Some of Rock's research ignited controversy in the 1970s and 1980s, when Christian conservatives insisted that his earlier embryo experiments were unethical and some feminists argued that he had misled the patients who participated in them.

The Rock biography grew out of an earlier collaboration between Marsh and Ronner on the book, "The Empty Cradle: Infertility in America from Colonial Times to the Present" (Johns Hopkins, 1996).

Source: Rutgers University

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