Carl Axel Gemzell (1910-2007)

“Is she pregnant?” or more often: “Am I pregnant?” For a long time, attempts have been made to answer this question with the help of external changes or unusual behaviours exhibited by the woman in question. And they still are: a craving for pickles, larger breasts or inexplicable irritability quickly arouse suspicion of a pregnancy. The gradual discovery of the complex control function exerted by hormones, which began in the early 20th century, gave rise to the idea that the beginning of a pregnancy can be revealed by hormonal patterns. However, it soon proved that the most important thing is determining the presence of the hormone human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG), which is produced in the placenta and is responsible for maintaining the pregnancy. This gave many researchers an opportunity to try out their methods in the search for a reliable test. Even failures were useful, as they provided new information.

Late in the 1950s, the Swedish doctor Carl Axel Gemzell and his student Leif Wide developed the first immunological pregnancy test, which replaced the others that were common at the time. Gemzell’s test was quicker and less expensive, though relatively insensitive, particularly during the early stages of a pregnancy. If the woman was pregnant, a clearly defined ring formed in the test tube. This phenomenon led to the slogan employed by the manufacturer, Organon: “I see a ring, girl, get your ring.” About a decade later, a new test appeared on the market, though it was eventually replaced by a better one. Until the end of the 1970s, these tests could be performed in specialised laboratories or well-equipped surgeries only, and home pregnancy tests weren’t available. Some doctors seemed to prefer having things this way, which prevented a woman who had just found out about an (unwanted) pregnancy from ‘getting silly ideas’.

Gemzell studied medicine at Stockholm’s Karolinska University Hospital and continued his education with a PhD in experimental endocrinology. He became associate professor in experimental endocrinology and later on also in Obstetrics and Gynecology. During 1949 to 1957 he spend periods for research at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City and at University of California, Berkley. In 1960 he became professor at Uppsala University and Head of the clinic of Obstetrics and Gynecology in Uppsala.

His work in the field of reproductive research changed, and indeed created, millions of families around the world. Professor Gemzell developed ‘the Gemzell Method’ of treating infertility in women through hormone therapy, which is the basis of all infertility treatments used today including in vitro fertilisation.

Read more
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