ILLEGAL?? INDECENT?? OBSCENE?? THE MATERNAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION AND
THE BEGINNINGS OF FAMILY PLANNING CLINICS IN CLEVELAND

Submitted to the Western Reserve Studies Symposium
"Time's Passage: The Social and Cultural Seasons of Western Reserve Life"
November 10-12, 1989

Jimmy E.W. Meyer
Ph.D. Candidate
Case Western Reserve University
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"...One has to guard against marriage becoming merely childless mating."
"...[Birth control] is race suicide, medically disastrous and economically unsound...The moral by-products are: It has a bad influence on the moral life of youth and destroys the sacredness of the marriage bond."

BACKGROUND

Contraception was illegal in the U.S. for almost a century, from 1873 until 1971. Classing birth control and abortion with obscenity and pornography, the federal Comstock Law of 1873 prohibited the mail, interstate transport and import of contraceptive supplies and information. Ohio law copied the federal statute, but exempted physicians and druggists. In the nineteen-thirties many physicians still refused to discuss family planning (medical schools did not yet teach contraceptive techniques). Yet the American birth rate continued to decline, especially among white middle- and upper-class families. Privately couples practiced family limitation in some form. Active birth control movements during the 1920s and 1930s highlighted the contradiction between private practice and public policy, between law on the books and law in action.2

Inspired by Margaret Sanger and motivated by their work as volunteers at a maternity hospital, two Cleveland women, Dorothy Brush and Hortense Shephard, decided in the 1920s to open the city’s first birth control clinic. After careful planning and extensive social, medical and legal groundwork, the Maternal Health Association opened its doors to Cleveland’s married women in 1928. Funding for the clinic came from private contributions, memberships and fees, charged on a sliding scale, for supplies and services. The Brush Foundation, concerned with the issues of population growth and population quality, provided a major portion of the association’s initial financial support. The clinic, located downtown in the Osborne Building, employed female physicians, nurses and social workers to provide examinations, dispense contraceptive supplies and make home visits. In the thirties, the Maternal Health Association added marital and pre-marital counseling, as well as men’s consultation, to its services. The clinic began training students from Western Reserve University’s medical school in 1931. An organization begun by privileged women, for the purpose of helping other not-so-privileged women manage their maternal responsibilities, the Maternal Health Association is an example of a voluntary association with feminist impulses successfully defying public policy. The direct ancestress of Planned Parenthood of Cleveland, the clinic has enjoyed a continuous sixty-one year existence, for many of those years Cleveland’s sole clinical birth control provider.3

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the Maternal Health Association through the eyes of its early clients. A collection of patient letters in the archives of Planned Parenthood of Cleveland provides a unique view of the clinic’s services and of the responses to those services. The letters, dated
between 1936 and 1938, reveal the feminist inclinations of these early family planners, providers and clientele alike, and the universality of woman’s concerns, living under the "shadow of maternity." The language is suprisingly frank, with no references to the indecency or illegality of contraception, and few references to its sinfulness. The men and women whose words appear below viewed birth control as a legitimate means of taking control of their lives, rather than a threat to the purity of marriage, a popular cry of opponents to family limitation.4

STATE OF THE ART
Contraceptive choices in the early twentieth century, other than abstinence, withdrawal, the rhythm method or abortion, were the diaphragm (also called a "pessary"), spermicidal jelly and the condom. The Maternal Health Association emphasized and usually dispensed jelly and diaphragms.5

MHA CLINIC
Two characteristics of the Maternal Health Association (MHA) emerge from clients’ writings: a wide geographical scope and a nurturing function. The wide area represented in the letters indicates the pioneering nature of Cleveland’s MHA. Women inquired or responded from cities and towns around Ohio - from Portsmouth to Toledo to Port Clinton - from states as distant as Connecticut and Nebraska, and even from foreign countries. An Alliance woman outlines the problems presented by such a distance - and the problems of a family on the fiscal edge.
Jan 20, 1938

Your letter came this morning stating that Cleveland may be far too expensive a trip for me. I am sure it would be as we are...not working and I am so worried that another baby will come is there any way that you can get help from a birth control center when you are not able to pay? I have two children living and had (4) four miscarriages I dont want to bring children into the wourld and cant support them...please let me know what you can do about it. I will go to Akron if you will send me the name of Physicians there or...I could ride to Cleveland with some friends of mine when they come over...Oh there must be some way to help me, please answere soon.

From overseas a Navy wife writes,
Dec 20, '37

...will you be good enough to keep my record at the clinic open for a year? My indefinite stay in France makes it rather difficult to keep in touch, however I would appreciate the opportunity of making a visit to the clinic upon my return to the USA...the advice I received [there] has given me and my husband great comfort and satisfaction, and I wish to express my appreciation to you for the benefits which your association dispenses.
Factors explaining the MHA’s broad geographic range include the lack of other public birth control facilities in Ohio and a strong woman-to-woman network. (The majority of patients in a 1938 study were referred to Cleveland’s MHA by another patient, friend, or interested individual.)

The friendly, chatty tone of the most of the writings testifies to the MHA’s nurturing role. The earliest of the correspondents refers, disparagingly, to the new trend of centralizing charitable activity in Cleveland as she sings the MHA clinic’s praises:

Jan 4-31

My dear Miss Volk:-
Your letter received with thanks. The only reason that I did not call you is that I still owe the $5. It just makes me sick, that I can not pay even that small amount as yet. What this most wonderful Institution has done for me, why it saved my life! It is not community fund and charity that we need, but the Mat. Health Association with millions of dollars to work, do and help with as they helped me....

Often the Maternal Health Association provided layette supplies to new mothers, probably unofficially. From a letter categorized by the MHA as "Poor Background of Patients,"

Saturday, October 31

Dear Mrs. Johnson
The little romper’s you gave me Saturday,...both pair fitted them babies, so if it isn’t any bother, if you would send me the other’s you have there, and other little clothes by mail and I will pay postage....I don’t know how I will thank you. Hoping to hear from you soon. Thank you and bye bye.

A letter from a woman who was possibly an MHA volunteer or employee is an eloquent testimonial to the clinic’s attention to more than just medical service.

Cleveland, O
Jan 6, 1937

Dear Miss Gaylord:
The little booties came yesterday and they are so dainty and pretty. I marvel at your having time to think of and do these lovely things for folks, when you are carrying so much responsibility and are so busy....
I want to thank you too for the joy I have had in working with the clinic these past few months. Rarely have I seen any organization where there is such unfailing helpfulness and good will among all the workers. I congratulate you on having creat[ed] an organization with such an atmosphere.
It has been a great pleasure to be associated with it....

A Cleveland widow writes a long, newsy letter, dated May 1937, in which she tells of feeling "so lost and alone I did not care to go on," but she informs the MHA that she is happy again, since she has become engaged to an old flame:

....I am telling you all this because you have always been so kind to me I feel like you are a real Friend to me.

....I do know you like to know your patients well and understand them in all ways. That's what I like so well about you.

....I remain your grateful Friend.

A few clients resent the MHA's personal approach as prying. One angry woman from Berea vented her frustrations in two typewritten pages, from which the following is an excerpt.

Oct. 3, 1936

Dear Miss Volk:

The reason I have not come to see you is that my few experiences at the clinic haven't been particularly pleasant or helpful ones.

In the first place, I object to your third degree. You ask questions which you have no business knowing, no business asking....I could have gone to any doctor and had him perform a major operation without answering the questions you asked.

The woman resents the clinic's insistence on an examination (she claimed to have been examined recently elsewhere), she is angry about waiting, "...wasting an hour of my time - which happens by the way to be just as precious as yours...," and finally states that she feels exploited and humiliated. Such complaints, though articulately expressed, represent an anomaly in this collection of correspondence. They do, however, suggest a maternalistic, possibly condescending attitude on the part of MHA staff.

MHA CLIENTELE

Two characteristics of the clinic's clientele stand out in these writings: the women's housebound circumstances and their active seeking out and welcome acceptance of the clinic's family planning services. The letter writers indicate that they shoulder complete responsibility for managing homes and families. Even if they work outside the home, the women make the arrangements for the child care and nurse ill family members, scheduling clinic visits around their husbands' working hours or sitters' availability. A Cleveland woman who is preparing to move requests, "...please pass this message along to the doctor, as I am so occupied during the day and in the evening. Even now my Son is hovering around grasping for the pen, and jerking the writing sheet, the reason for this unkempt page...." Often women cannot come in at all to the Osborne Building for follow-up supplies, but send a brother, sister, husband or friend
instead. The reasons given for not returning to the clinic run the gamut: "my husband has been ill," "I have had poison oak," "the children...have bloodpoisoning," "I had a nervous breakdown," "I don't have the carfare," "I've been working two jobs," "I work every Saturday," "Mother broke her arm," "I have an ingrown toenail and cannot wear shoes."

These patients welcome and accept gratefully the Maternal Health Association's services. Despite the financial, travel and other difficulties, the women actively seek out the information they need, making intricate arrangements in order to take care of themselves. From a sanatorium a woman, probably a tuberculosis patient, writes, "...within the next two months I expect to be discharged - apparently quite well. After that time I am sure to need the services of the Maternal Clinic. In fact I look forward to your help eagerly - my future holds no fear because of the method...." Even those who leave the MHA express gratitude, as does this Elyria woman:

"Dear Madam Volk,

...I am sorry to say I will be unable to continue your methods.

May I thank you a thousand times for your kindness and personal interest in the past, also your much needed help at the time it was needed so badly. I shall never forget you or your associates in the future...."

A former patient who has recently moved to Illinois writes:

"...I want to thank you all for the wonderful service which you have given to me and to my friends, and although we are mosttimes lax in expressing our thanks, I am deeply and sincerely grateful to the Maternal Health Clinic, and owe much of my present happiness to you. The friendliness of everyone connected with the clinic always make a visit a pleasure, and I hope you may continue to make life more pleasant for a lot of worried wives and mothers...."

Although the majority of these correspondents are women, men also occasionally contacted the MHA. One husband responds from Lorain:

Dear Miss Volk,

As yet my wife has nothing to report for she has not used it. She was upset by different things people had said about it. Her brother sort of caused most of the trouble by not believing in it. Given a few more weeks and I believe she will be alright. Will have her write you then in regards to how she is getting along. Thanking you for your trouble.

A Lakewood man wrote to the American Birth Control League in New York, after reading a book entitled "Facts and Frauds of Feminine Hygiene," to inquire about a clinic in Cleveland, saying, "...We have one child and would like to limit our family to that for a while and at the same time take away the fear when we have marital relations...." The Birth Control
League then forwarded the request to the MHA. A third gentleman, a

groom-to-be, inquires from Kentucky:

January 16, 1935

Dear Sir:

I'm to be married in February and it is quite
desirable that I have no children for two or three
years. I am 23; my wife is 19.

Please send or tell us where to send for
information on birth-control; the safest, sanest,
and most practical method, etc.

Thank you very much in advance.

The men speak in tones matter of fact and direct, with no embarassment or
disdain, indicating a respect for their partners and for their own role in
preventing procreation.

Unfortunately such men represent the minority in this sample. Several
women wrote that they were not going to use contraception because of their
husbands. Such letters comprise a separate category in the MHA collection,
"Failure-Man Objects."

Feb 9, 1938

Dear Madam

I am not going to keep the appointment I have
with you for Thursday. My husband wants me to drop
it and in order to have peace in my home I must.
Some day he may change his mind and I shall come to
see you then....

Another woman bows to her husband's wishes for additional family:

Dec 2, 1937

Dear Madam:

I'm writing to tell you not to put me out of the
clinic for I still want to be one of the members of
it. For I took your method for 5 1/2 years and it
has helped me but my husband has a job and wants me
to have one more baby so I am writing to tell you I
am pregnant 4 mos and expect to have her the first
week in May. Please answer me and tell me that I
can still be one of your members when I get over
this. Thank you.

Then there is the woman who blames neither her husband nor the clinic, but
herself:

Dear Rosina Volk

I am ansering your letter sorry I didn't write
sooner it isn't necessary for me to come back as I
have been pregnant for three months now
dont think it is your fault for it isent it is
mine for being big enough D-F for sleeping with
such a man

so forget me sorry

and so long
better luck next time
maybe

There are only two references in this group of letters to birth control as a sin. From a Cleveland woman:
Sept 20, 1935

Dear Mrs. V.N.P.
I am writing to you to let you no why I am not down there this morning my Husband become a religious] man since I was there and we lost one of our girls by a fire and we think it may be wrong for us to use the protection but I want to thank you for your help. . . . I will be sending your money soon.

The second reference is in a record of a home visit by clinic staff which is filed with the letters, under "Failure-Religion."
5/13/36

"when you get convicted the Lord takes care of you so now I trust in the Lord." Oldest child 14, youngest 8 (4 children). one boy had infantile paralysis and girl born with club feet and dislocated hip, had bone trouble (increasing) . . . W's church (Pentecostal) tells her it is a sin to prevent a germ from forming a child. W's sister has received (presumably from the Lord) her fifth baby. . . . Is convicted it is a sin to use method... .

CONCLUSION
The group of less than 200 clients represented by these letters is a minute proportion of the over 3000 women listed as MHA patients from the years 1936-1939.
Although one may question the representativeness of this particular segment to the whole, their written record illuminates the MHA's feminist role as a pioneer and a nurturing organization, at least to some women and men. The letters also remind us of the eternal binding nature of woman's household responsibilities, as well as the determination with which some women took charge of their lives despite those responsibilities, thankfully embracing the chance to protect themselves and their future progeny. Many women in the early twentieth-century Western Reserve considered birth control natural and essential - not illegal, not obscene, not sinful.

Several crucial issues remain outside the scope of this paper. Eugenics - the idea of maintaining the purity of the Anglo-Saxon race was in the forefront of public birth control rhetoric and behind much clinic funding. What effect did this ideology have on individual users and providers? Abortions in Cleveland - how expensive were they? How available? were they often prosecuted? How did this impact women's proclivity towards other methods of contraception? Religion - nationally Catholic and fundamentalist churches opposed family limitation while many
Protestant and Jewish clergy proclaimed the social gospel of birth control. How is this conflict reflected in Cleveland?

Time's passage - the words of these early twentieth century women and men reveal striking similarities to contemporary situations. Many women still suffer in dire economic straits; many still assume most of their households' burdens. Most still live under the shadow of maternity. Failure of contraception, especially for those women who cannot or who chose not to use the Pill, remains a haunting specter. Most critically, the tenuous nature of public support of birth control and the reactive nature of public policy towards sexuality and towards women once again threatens woman's reproductive freedom.

"Dear Nurse, 
Hubby and I think it's swell. Thanks to you...."
NOTES

The letters cited in this essay are all located in one MHA Scrapbook, untitled, in the archives of Planned Parenthood of Cleveland, Cleveland, Ohio (PPC).


7. MHA Annual Reports, 1936-1939.
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