

No 36, August 2005

Society for the Social History of Medicine

# The Gazette



ISSN 0962-7839

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*Sex Education of the Young in the Twentieth Century: A  
Cultural History, Durham, April 16-17, 2005.*

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## OFFICIAL NOTICES

### **Annual General Meeting, Paris, September 9, 2005**

The SSHM Annual General Meeting 2005 will take place in at the Ministère de Recherche in Paris on Friday, September 9, on the occasion of the conference 'Cultural History of Health and Beyond', September 7-10, 2005, which we are co-hosting with the European Association for the History of Medicine and Health (see page 5). The AGM will take place from 5.30pm to 7.00pm in the grand amphithéâtre Poincaré.

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## CONFERENCE REPORT

### **Sex Education of the Young in the Twentieth Century: A Cultural History**

**Durham, April 16-17, 2005**

Durham provided the picturesque (if wet) location for this international conference, organised jointly by Dr Lutz Sauerteig, Wellcome Lecturer in the history of medicine at the University of Durham, and Professor Roger Davidson, Professor of Social History at the University of Edinburgh. The meeting was co-sponsored by the Wolfson Research Institute (University of Durham), the School of History and Classics (University of Edinburgh), and the Society for the Social History of Medicine. The conference, designed to explore the cultural history of sex education during the twentieth century, attracted fourteen speakers and a range of enthusiastic participants from Europe, North America, Australia and the West Indies, and from a wide variety of disciplines in the humanities, social and health sciences, film studies, education and law.

In her keynote paper, Lesley Hall (London) provided us with her trademark thought-provoking and wide-ranging insights into this comparatively under-studied field – scholars seem to have approached sex education with the same diffidence as teachers. Lesley asked at least as many questions as she answered, causing subsequent speakers to start furiously scribbling and editing their papers in response! Amongst other things, she queried how we approach this subject as historians, what sort of archival material is available to allow us to do so, and from what perspective such research should be conducted – whether as part of the history of medicine, sexuality, childhood, or education and pedagogy?

Roger Davidson (Edinburgh) explored the content and broader cultural implications of the Alliance of Honour's work in relation to Scottish post-1945 sex education which, he argued, displayed a continued adherence to a policy focused on the control of the sexual instinct, the conflation of sexuality and pollution, and a gendered hierarchy of normality and deviance. For the same period, Bruno Wanrooij (Florence) explored the history of Italian sexual education. He documented how the Catholic Church exercised a dominant influence on matters of family and sexuality, and opposed attempts to include human sexuality in the school curriculum. Thus young people often received incomplete information, if any, which tended to focus on transmitting moral values rather than concrete information. However, the paper also demonstrated how a progressive minority within the catholic community began to appreciate the potential risks of sexual ignorance. Britta McEwen (Los Angeles) explored Catholic responses to the sexual education of children in early twentieth-century Austria, and attempts by socialist and reform-minded educators to replace religious authority on sexual matters with a more scientific and publicly

distributed discourse of sexual knowledge. She argued that the production and distribution of sexual knowledge underwent a dramatic shift, where the question of the 'naturalness' of sex, a renewed importance of motherhood, and an overwhelming emphasis on purity and responsibility made children's sexual education central to the project of reforming sex.

Lena Lennerhed (Huddinge) explored the history of sex education in Swedish schools within the context of the emerging Swedish welfare state: how sexuality and 'normality' were defined, how female and male sexuality was depicted, and the status of sex-related knowledge. While the 'progressive' or at least 'liberal' nature of Sweden's sex education has been widely recognised, this was shown to have been a relatively recent development, with attempts to alter the content and objectives of sex education by focusing on pleasure and gender equality dating from the 1970s. Magdalena Gawin (Warsaw) outlined Polish disputes between the progressive intelligentsia and the conservative clergy about early twentieth-century sex education: over who was authorised to sexually enlighten adolescents; over how such education should be provided (whether imparted through the official school curriculum or only by parents); and over whether such teaching should be couched in relation to analogies with the animal world or in less intimate metaphorical language. Areas of agreement – that sex education should strengthen self-control mechanisms and delay sexual initiation – were also charted.

Within a communist context, Mark Fenimore (Manchester) explored sex education debates in the German Democratic Republic. He argued that this area illuminates both the gender and generational tensions that lay just below the surface, and the struggle between holding onto the past and embracing the future. The clash of communist progressive tendencies with an

autocratic society created friction between the desire to use sexual enlightenment as a means of presenting a humane and progressive face to socialism, and concern to constrain 'decadent' sexual behaviour which threatened to destabilise and undermine the Republic. Frances Bernstein (Madison) explored attempts to address 1920s Soviet sexual concerns by developing an extensive programme of popular medical education to provide 'sexual enlightenment'. This became a central component of the revolutionary project to construct a socialist society. Sex advice for youths advocated bodily self-control to prevent sexuality's premature awakening, and the redirection of sexual energy into more productive channels for the collective. The solitary vice of masturbation was thought to be the most dangerous sexual expression of all, because of its symbolic antagonism to the collectivist ideal of the new state.

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, US educators sought evidence to persuade their colleagues and policymakers of the need for sex education. Susan Freeman (Mankato) analysed the resulting data collected by American graduate students on the sources and content of teenage factual knowledge of sexual anatomy and reproduction. She argued that the 'facts of life' approach subordinated the information which young people sought to notions of conformity and preparation for marriage. Lutz Sauerteig (Durham) interrogated sex education books, published for a German readership between 1900 and 1980, to explore their representations of pregnancy and childbirth, and how they reflected prevailing concepts of 'normal' sexual behaviour and the sexual body. He argued that these representations and narratives played a central role in defining masculinity and femininity and that, over this period, representations of motherhood underwent fundamental changes. Barbara Crowther (Wolverhampton) analysed sexual discourse found in 1930s British public service health

films. She argued that the treatment of ‘sex’ in such films reflected an institutional double-standard which related closely to the discourse of the male-led animal reproductive imperative found in natural history films, and contributed to an unconscious ideologically motivated *agnotology* – the cultural production of ignorance – about sexual and reproductive matters. Films intended to be informative in fact colluded in a sexual culture of opacity and evasion.

Bringing the debate forward, Ann Blair (Leeds) and Daniel Monk (London) explored contemporary British sex education law. Adopting a socio-legal approach, they focused on two issues: how public interest has been defined to see young peoples’ sexual activity as a social problem demanding legal intervention in school-based education; and how law constructs conflicting images of childhood in different public and private spaces, such as classroom, home, and doctor’s surgery. They argued that, underlying the political rhetoric of child welfare and rights arguments, the needs and experiences of children continue to be marginalised in public policy. Hera Cook (Sydney) then discussed the concept of pre-pubescent sexuality within modern Britain, and the historical continuities reflected in current debates. Utilising social learning theory, Hera argued that the denial of sexual experience to children (including nudity and body awareness) has played a major role in the creation of a constricted and prudish sexual culture; and that discussions of child sexuality and its development through play and learning have been stifled by adult anxiety over sexual precocity and paedophilia, and our ‘infantilisation’ of children.

The concluding discussion raised a number of common and important themes. Since most papers focused on one particular country, the concept of national identity was debated. It was generally agreed that sex

education material and policy was not so much nationally specific as culturally and historically contingent. Countries did, however, often position themselves in opposition to a prudish or immoral ‘other’ in sexuality debates. The concept of ‘race’ engaged lively debate. For example, in opposition to the concept of ‘civilisation’, the notion of ‘primitive’ sexuality was associated strongly with ‘unrestricted’ and ‘dangerous’ sexuality. This was felt to be an area in which future work might be fruitfully conducted.

The concept of education was discussed widely. Parent disinclination to enlighten children on the facts of life, school reluctance to enforce teaching on this potentially problematic and embarrassing matter, and (less desirable?) alternative sources of information suggest that schools have constituted the least useful forum for sex education. It is also a particularly unusual form of education in that sex educators often wanted children to forget this potentially destabilising or ‘corrupting’ information as soon as it had been imparted. This in turn raised issues of how useful formal sex education was in the learning process. It was suggested that perhaps it is, rather, a symbolic way to express adult anxieties, and a wish to control and protect the nostalgic concept of childhood innocence.

A further cluster of issues related to the nature of expertise within sex education: what makes an expert in this field? How is that expertise conveyed? How do they justify their right to educate us? Traditionally, this field has been occupied by a diversity of personnel, ranging from teachers, doctors and the clergy to parents and peers, but how do we judge which information was perceived to be the most ‘correct’, ‘useful’ or influential? Indeed some of the most useful information might be non-verbal or non-textual communications. And how have the young on the ‘receiving end’ – those reading the text, watching the film or listening to the

informer – interpreted the issue? The relationship between sex education and paedagogical theory is often associated with progressive schools. Is progress a useful category to employ and, if so, whose values should we place our ideas of progress on? Inherent contradictions can be found between catholic, socialist and feminist ideologies and notions of progress, with each of these categories having multiple forms. Some participants thus suggested the idea of ‘modernity’ to be preferable to ‘progress’.

It was also noted that the discourse of pleasure was almost entirely absent in these histories. Generally, sex education seems more commonly to have been framed within a discourse of prevention and limitation of damage: how to avoid venereal disease, how not to get pregnant, how not to indulge in sexual relationships at an inappropriately young age.

Among the concluding sentiments, it was recognised that, despite the significant differences between the acceptability, extent and efficacy of sex education in Europe and Northern America, striking similarities and parallels can also be discerned. More depressingly, although details have changed over the last century, many of the underlying issues remain. The organisers and participants must be thanked for a most interesting and sociable couple of days. The rich and varied selection of papers will assuredly make an excellent edited collection, and a valuable contribution to the international history of sex education.

Gayle Davis  
Centre for the History of Medicine  
University of Glasgow

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## **CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT**

### **Cultural History of Health and Beyond**

**Joint conference of the European Association for the History of Medicine and Health and the SSHMH**

**Ministère de la Recherche, Paris, France, September 7-10, 2005**

For more information, see the EAHMH website:

<http://www.eahmh.net/>

Conference organiser:

Patrice Bourdelais  
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## **CONFERENCE ANNOUNCEMENT**

### **Identifying Medical Records in the South Wales Coalfield Collection**

**Swansea University, December 14, 2005**

This one-year project, currently underway at Swansea University, is the result of a successful funding application by the School of Health Science, and Library and Information Services, to the Wellcome Trust's Research Resources in Medical History Scheme. The project began in January 2005, with Professor Anne Borsay (School of Health Science) as Director, and Dr. Sara Brady as Research Assistant.

The objectives of the project are: to identify and record holdings within the South Wales Coalfield Collection (SWCC) which are most relevant to the medical history of the Coalfield; to produce an annotated Guide for publication; and to hold a one-day conference to promote and discuss medical history in relation to the Coalfield.

The conference is entitled 'Accessing the Medical Past: The Occupational and Community Health of the South Wales Coalfield' and will be held on Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> December 2005, at the School of Health Science, Swansea University. Speakers will include Professor Anne Borsay, Professor Chris Williams (Swansea University), Dr Arthur McIvor (University of Strathclyde), Dr Jo Melling (University of Exeter), and Dr. Steven Thompson (University of Wales Aberystwyth).

Contact for further information:

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 **BOOK ANNOUNCEMENT:  
RECENT PUBLICATIONS IN THE  
SOCIAL HISTORY OF MEDICINE**

**Childbirth and the Display of  
Authority in Early Modern France**

**Lianne McTavish**

**Women and Gender in the Early Modern  
World series. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.  
247 pages, 29 illustrations. Hardback.  
ISBN: 0-7546-3619-4.**

McTavish argues that early modern French obstetrical treatises published between 1550 and 1730 were sites of display participating in both the production and contestation of authoritative knowledge in childbirth. She emphasizes the visual culture of childbirth, carefully analyzing the vivid author portraits and images of the unborn regularly included in the treatises. Written descriptions of looking and being looked at are also examined, revealing anxious male practitioners who strove to project a trustworthy appearance within the birthing chamber.

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 **BOOK ANNOUNCEMENT:  
RECENT PUBLICATIONS IN THE  
SOCIAL HISTORY OF MEDICINE**

**Food Poisoning, Policy and  
Politics: Corned Beef and Typhoid  
in Britain in the 1960s**

**David F. Smith, H. Lesley Diack, with T.  
Hugh Pennington and Elizabeth M.  
Russell (eds)**

**Rochester: Boydell and Brewer, 2005.  
352 pages. Hardback. £50 / \$90.**

Members of the SSHM can benefit from a 25% discount. Contact Boydell and Brewer on +33 (0) 1394 610 600 and quote reference 05109

This volume is a study of the 1963-4 typhoid outbreak: its causes and effects, and the responses of health professionals, politicians and the media. From this, and its timely examination of the weighing of food safety against commercial interests, it suggests ways in which such epidemics might be better handled in the future.

The problem of food poisoning and food-borne infections is currently one of vigorous debate, highlighted since the 1980s by numerous outbreaks and scares involving salmonella in eggs and, just recently, lettuce, listeria in cheese, the links between vCJD and BSE, E. Coli 0157 in cooked meats, and foot and mouth disease. Yet, as this book shows, the various issues involved were important as early as 1963-4, when there were serious typhoid outbreaks in Harlow, South Shields, Bedford and Aberdeen, traced to contaminated corned beef imported from Argentina.

Based upon extensive research, using archives which have only recently become available, private papers and interviews as well as secondary literature, the book analyses the course of the outbreak and looks at the responses of politicians, officials, health professionals, business interests, the

media and the public. It also considers the difficult issue of the weighing of food safety against international trade and other business and economic interests; conflicts between government departments; rivalry between professionals such as doctors and veterinarians; the effects upon and influence of victims and local communities; and the conduct of and responses to an official enquiry. Overall, it draws out generic lessons for how such epidemics should be handled, adding an historical perspective to contemporary debates.

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**ROY PORTER STUDENT ESSAY COMPETITION**

The Society for the Social History of Medicine (SSHIM) invites submissions to its 2005 Roy Porter Student Essay Prize Competition. This prize will be awarded to the best original, unpublished essay in the social history of medicine submitted to the competition as judged by the SSHIM's assessment panel. It is named in honour of the late Professor Roy Porter, a great teacher and a generous scholar.

The competition is open to undergraduate and post-graduate students in full or part-time education. The winner will be awarded £500.00, and his or her entry may also be published in the journal, *Social History of Medicine*.

The deadline for entries is December 31, 2005.

Further details and entry forms can be down-loaded from the SSHIM's website: <http://www.sshm.org>

Alternatively, please contact

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