

## SEXOLOGISTS

*The desire to control fertility is as old as human society... Conflict between the social need to preserve the species and the individual desire to escape the burdens of childbearing is a universal part of the human experience...The Europeans who founded American society in the 17th century came from an expanding culture that had developed a powerful rationale for parenthood. Woman's main social role was to bear many children in order to guarantee the growth and eventual worldwide triumph of the Christian faith...Social needs or goals are often at odds, however, with the aspirations of individuals.*  
(In "From Private Vice to Public Virtue" by James Reed, 1978)

Many individuals were actively involved in the so-called Birth Control Movement in American society since the early 19th century — and for different reasons. Among them were three medical pioneers who are discussed here: Charles Knowlton, Alexander Skene and Robert L. Dickinson.

**CHARLES KNOWLTON**, who was born in Massachusetts in 1800 and died in 1850, called himself a "free enquirer"— his enemies called him an "Infidel." He was also a "Body-Snatcher" because as a medical student at Dartmouth (then, New Hampshire Medical Institution), unable to afford the cost of tuition, he stole corpses to dissect.

When Charles Knowlton heard that one could sell bodies for fifty dollars each, he and another medical student, who also needed money to attend the lectures, borrowed a wagon and a horse and stopped at a cemetery where they dug up a body. However, the warm weather and rain caused the recently buried body to deteriorate, making it unsellable, Knowlton and the other student dissected and removed the bones from the corpse, planning to sell just the bones. They continued their journey and about ten miles from the school, they learned of a recent burial and dug it up. Upon reaching Dartmouth, the professor of anatomy said that he was not currently seeking bodies as dissections would not begin for several weeks. However, the professor paid them twenty dollars for their trouble and ordered them to bury the corpse in a casket of burnt charcoal. Nevertheless, Knowlton was convicted and served time in jail.

Charles Knowlton's graduation thesis in 1924 advocated wide-spread post-mortem examinations in order to promote knowledge of human anatomy.

*Let it become a general practice for physicians, to give their bodies by will, for dissection and the prejudice existing on the subject will soon be done away; and it will be as common for persons to request that their bodies may be dissected, as it now is, for them to beg that their graves may be guarded, against the resurrectionist [grave robber.]*

After graduation, Knowlton was licensed to practice medicine and in 1831 he wrote America's first birth control book, *Fruits of Philosophy, or The Private Companion of Young Married People*. He was convicted for that as well, and again was imprisoned, this time serving three months of hard labor. Knowlton was an outsider for most of his life, fighting religious and social conformity. Growing up surrounded by superstition and hypocrisy, he became dedicated to finding and telling the truth as he understood it. He was an outspoken atheist and although opposed by authorities in the church and government, he went ahead and said what he wanted.

Eventually Knowlton settled in Ashfield Mass., but the town's minister began a campaign against "infidelity and licentiousness," targeting the new doctor as its source. He'd been showing his book to his patients that contained a summary of what was then known about the physiology of conception. It also listed a number of methods to treat infertility and impotence and explained a method of birth control that he'd developed: to wash out the vagina after intercourse with certain chemical solutions.

*It occurred to me, to add something to the [douche] water that should not hurt the woman, but yet kill the little tender animalcules, or in other words destroy the fecundating property of the semen.*

In the first five years, *Fruits* sold 7,000 copies at from fifty cents to one dollar, the price deliberately kept high to keep it out of the hands of the immature. He became a leading country doctor in western Massachusetts and eventually found respectability as a staunch defender of orthodox practice against quackery, but he remained a freethinker and contributed articles to newspapers and medical journals.

Twenty-seven years after Dr. Knowlton's death from heart disease at age 49, two social activists republished his work in England and publicity from a subsequent public obscenity trial made the book a bestseller. Its circulation increased from an average of 700 per year to 125,000 in just one year and, no doubt, part of the book's popularity, other than titillation, was that it provided his readers with understanding of their sexual anatomies and physiology.

**ALEXANDER SKENE** (1837-1900) emigrated from Scotland to the United States in 1857 and enlisted in the Union army. Settling in Brooklyn after the war, he was known for his capacity for hard work. He encouraged his students to consider specializing in gynecology at a time when most physicians were unwilling to recognize it as a specialty. He wasn't a feminist by modern standards. He argued that women were unique, not inferior, but that woman's social role was determined by her biological role as a breeder. To be a wife and mother was "the chief end object of woman's life....The fulfillment of the injunction to multiply was "the highest earthly function of woman."

*The woman who willingly tries to reverse the order of her physical being in the hope of gratifying some fancy or ambition, is almost sure to suffer sooner or later from disappointment and ill health....The home is woman's kingdom. There she rules or should rule, with an unseen hand...She governs governs by the kindness of her heart, which is far more potent than the intrigues of the head which kings and statesmen employ. If she possesses health and vigor of body and mind when she takes her place at home, she will ever find her duties pleasant and agreeable.*

Dr. Skene was a skilled practitioner and while working at Long Island College Hospital, he constantly improved techniques and surgical tools. In 1880 Dr. Skene published an article describing the paraurethral ducts in women, then a frequent and unrecognized source of infection. His findings, which came to be known as "Skene's Glands," was based almost entirely on his clinical observations.

As a lecturer Skene stressed the use of visual aids and one day he noticed a student who didn't appear to be paying attention and seemed to be doodling. Skene demanded to see what the young man was drawing and was impressed that they were accurate depictions of the clinical demonstration. He asked the talented young artist to assist him preparing illustrations for a textbook that he

was planning. The young man was Robert Labou Dickinson, the two became good friends and colleagues. The book *Education and Culture as Related to the Health of Women* contained 161 of Dickinson's drawings. It became a classic and after publication in 1888, it went through three editions and seven printings, and dominated the American market in gynecology for a decade.

During his career, Dr. Skene founded the American Gynecological Society and wrote more than 200 scholarly papers and, by all accounts, he managed to avoid professional controversy — *until fairly recently!*

Alexander Skene died on July 4, 1900 at his summer house in the Catskills and, five years later, a bust of him was erected in Brooklyn's Grand Army Plaza. It remained largely unnoticed for more than a century until in 2011, it was replaced by a bust of Abraham Lincoln. Not surprisingly, this caused some criticism. One physician critic complained, "Monuments shouldn't all be for generals and politicians... Skene was a champion for women's health. Those glands weren't prominent. You didn't even notice them unless they were inflamed." Another physician said about Honest Abe: "He's on the penny, he's on the Mall. Enough Lincoln, already. It's time gynecologists get their due."

Alexander Skene was buried in the Rockland Cemetery in Sparkill, NY where today a much less grand monument stands alone atop a wind-swept hill far above the Hudson River. I wonder whether Skene is thinking what all the fuss was about?

**ROBERT LATOU DICKINSON** was born in Jersey City in 1861. After he completed his medical studies at Long Island College Hospital in 1881, because he was only 20, he had to wait a year before he could get a license and he spent that year off working for Dr. Skene who often advised his students to specialize in women's diseases. Dickinson did just that and soon became one of Brooklyn's busiest gynecologists. In his daily work he constantly encountered tragedies resulting from venereal disease, illegal abortions, and marital dysfunction and he attributed much of this to widespread ignorance and maladjustment about sex. He was convinced of the necessity for enlightened scientific response and he took up the task with missionary zeal.

Dr. Dickinson was distinctly unusual for his time because he routinely questioned his patients about sex and contraception. He compiled more than 5,000 detailed sexual histories of his married patients, accompanied by his sketches -- and eventually, these served as the basis of his emerging ideas. He was a prolific contributor to medical journals and as a medical lecturer, he railed against such social matters as tight corseting and he encouraged women to exercise more -- particularly on bicycles.

However, Dickinson's main focus was to encourage physicians to talk about sex with their patients. As he said, it was a subject which "bristles with difficulties and misunderstandings and aversions and false constructions and temptations to evil-mindedness, [but the physician who is] clean of mind and happy in his marriage [is the only person with the knowledge and objectivity] to save his people from their ignorance." What was required for mutual satisfaction between married couples was frank discussion and mutual sensitivity: "It is all wrong if just submitted to -- or seen as a duty -- in most cases "patience and desire and the use of Vaseline will overcome all difficulty."

When Dr. Dickinson retired from office practice at age sixty, he moved to Manhattan, lived off his investments and launched what he called his "second career" — and only then, did he dare to publicly advocate contraception. In 1923 Dickinson founded the Committee on Maternal Health which included prominent medical specialists and became a clearing house for research and information concerning contraception. It was based at Dickinson's office, now located in the New York Academy of Medicine, and promoted "a broad program to improve the quality of life" by liberating married women from disease, disability and ignorance." Dickinson suggested that in the cases he had studied, the husband's "lack of aggressive charm breeds suspicion that he does not know enough to be interesting." As he said, sex was a force to be accepted and enjoyed -- "children should be wanted, planned -- and spaced."

In 1933 Dr. Dickinson published *Human Sex Anatomy*, an atlas with 174 of his own illustrations of the genitalia including during intercourse. It was lambasted as pornography but, undaunted, in 1937 he convinced the conservative AMA to endorse contraception as a legitimate medical service and to encourage teaching of sexology in medical schools.

Dr. Dickinson often made common cause with Margaret Sanger who aggressively advocated “a woman’s right to birth control.” Her slogan was that women should raise more hell -- and fewer babies. Sanger and Dickinson had an on-again, off-again relationship -- sometime rivals, other times collaborators. They disagreed over who should control reproduction – the women themselves or their doctors. His position was that “we as a profession should take hold of this matter (of contraception)] and not let it receive harm by being pushed in any undignified or improper manner.” There also was a dark side to this story for like many intellectuals during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Dr. Dickinson (and Sanger too) was an ardent eugenicist and favored mandatory sterilization for certain categories of people.

In 1937 a well-known sculptor Malvina Hoffman was invited by then 70 year old Dr. Dickinson to collaborate with him on an exhibition about maternal health that was to be shown at New York’s World’s Fair in 1939. Hoffman declined, apparently because she suspected she wouldn’t be paid enough, but she suggested a young Scotsman by the name of Abram Belskie with whom’d she’d sometimes worked. Dr. Dickinson planned to make a series of two dimensional drawings of fetal development in utero but Belskie convinced him to work in 3-D, making full-sized, flesh colored simulations in terra cotta. Two million people viewed the Dickinson-Belskie Birth Series at the 1939 World’s Fair and that began a twelve year collaboration and in later years the two men began making medical models to be used as teaching tools. They switched to latex and plastic which were more lifelike than clay and eventually more than 160,000 models were sold to schools and museums.

In 1943 Robert Latou Dickinson, by now a vigorous octagenerian, met a much younger biologist from Indiana who would succeed him as the country’s leading sexologist -- Alfred Kinsey. Legend has it that when the two first met, the older man tearfully exclaimed, “At last! At last! This is what I’ve been hoping for all these years.” Kinsey’s early work involved the mating of wasps (in small letters) and much later he acknowledged that he’d been inspired by Dickinson’s work.

In 1946 Dr. Dickinson won the prestigious Lasker Award for his career contributions as “America’s leading medical sexologist.” This was two years before Kinsey’s first book appeared and when Dickinson received his copy, he wrote a letter of thanks to Kinsey saying, “I have my copy at last. Glory be to God.” When Robert Latou Dickinson died in 1950 at age 89 after surgery for

prostate cancer, Kinsey rushed from Indiana to New York to lay claim to the papers that he'd been promised by the old man. Today many of them are housed at the famous Kinsey Institute for Sex Research -- for which Dickinson had designed the official bookplate.

The three physicians whom I've described were among a small group of reformers who pioneered a modern approach to sexuality. As historian James H. Jones noted in his biography of Alfred Kinsey, :

*On the one hand, they served as theorists of a new sexual ethic designed to promote tolerance and diversity; on the other, they became apologists for those apparently deviant forms of sexuality that the Victorians, with their exclusive commitment to adult, genital, heterosexual intercourse, had been reluctant even to recognize.....In practically every other area of life, middle-class Americans were being told they had a right to be happy... And as the rules of economic life changed, so did the restraints on private behavior. Passion, like capital, was to be spent, not husbanded.*