

Foundations, Eugenic Sterilization, and the Emergence of the World Population Control Movement¹

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We academics often toil in isolation and relative obscurity. This isolation, unfortunately, is often the product of our own unwillingness or inability to bring the fruits of our labor to a wider audience, and the somewhat ironic fact that when one of our colleagues does achieve public notoriety, they are all too frequently scorned by others in the field. This situation is unfortunate in many ways, not the least of which is the fact that the things that we do, as if the case we hope with this conference, can be both of great practical values and of deep significance to issues of wide importance. While many of these ideas are commonplace to us, they were brought home with particular force to me this past March, when a research interest of mine suddenly became the hot news issue of the day. At that time, the Senate of the California State legislature held a series of hearing regarding the history of the state's aggressive sterilization laws which were on the books from the time they were first passed in 1909 until they were finally repealed in the late 1970s. The Senate called upon a number of experts, most notably Paul Lombardo, of the University of Virginia's Bioethics Institute. When the Senators heard Lombardo's testimony concerning the more than 20,000 people who were subjected to state sponsored sterilization, they reacted with shock and horror. Most Californians, and most of the members of the Senate panel, had no idea that these sterilizations had occurred; later that day governor Grey Davis issued a sweeping apology on behalf of the state to those who had been affected.

So, what is my connection to all this? Let me quote briefly from the opening of an article by reporter Mike Anton on the fallout from those hearings that appeared on the front page of the July 16 edition of this year's *Los Angeles Times* under the headline "Forced Sterilization Once Seen as a Path to a Better World:

In a basement at Caltech, 59 gray boxes contain thousands of documents that reveal in detail how an influential group of California men once hoped to direct the fate of the human race. Within the brittle files is the story of the state's long and largely forgotten effort to sterilize mental patients. Memos show how civic leaders helped popularize eugenics around the world, including Nazi Germany. Case histories offer a glimpse of the more than 20,000 people who were, by law, sterilized in state hospitals from 1909 through the 1960s . . . The Caltech archive contain 16 boxes of patient cases that will remain closed until 2005. But hundred of unnamed records offer sketchy profiles of patients and the motives of doctors who operated on them.²

With a slight tip of the hat to Anton's dramatic prose, let me say that I know those 59 gray boxes in the basement at Caltech very well, and I'm one of only two or three people who have looked through them all. The documents, by the way, are not that brittle, with the exception of the several hundred individual case reports on people who were sterilized at the Sonoma State Home for feeble-minded infants and children. Those are the records in the boxes that will remain closed until 2005. About ten years ago, I worked for several years as the staff historian at the Archives of the California Institute of Technology. At that time, I was presented with a fascinating opportunity to process the papers of the Human Betterment Foundation. The Gosney/Human Betterment Foundation records had been transferred to the Institute Archives from the Caltech's Waverly warehouse in 1968, where they had been stored after the dissolution of the Human Betterment Foundation twenty-five years earlier. The papers, however, remained closed to researchers due to legal issues relating to personal medical records in the collection. By the early 1990s, a decision was made by the Caltech Archivist, Judith Goodstein, to

open the collection to researchers after the papers were processed. My arrival at Caltech in the fall of 1992 was well timed, and I proceeded to process the papers of the Human Betterment Foundation, which were then opened to researchers.

The question, of course, is why the availability of such papers—available now for almost a decade—and for that matter the existence of the California sterilization program, should suddenly become a hot political issue and front-page news in the *LA Times*? The answer to this question, without much doubt, lie both in the nature of the political discussions in this country and the sensationalistic economy of the journalistic enterprise. Beyond these somewhat intractable issues, though, lies a very real and important concern about the way that aspects of the past are suppressed, forgotten, or conveniently written out of both our grand national history and the more localized, and perhaps even more influential, historical memories of particular enterprises and institutions. For in thinking about how the past matters, as we are doing today, we should not forget that people in positions of influence and power make decisions everyday that they consider informed judgments based on past experiences. Those experiences, though, are limited by what gets remembered as history and what gets forgotten.

Of course there really isn't anything particularly new in the story of the California sterilization program, at least to those of who work in the history of eugenics. The general outlines of the history of the eugenics movement and in the U.S., Britain, and Germany have been well established during the past two decades by several major monographs. But there are aspects of the story that are yet to be told. One recent trend has been studies of eugenics movements in various national or regional contexts. Of particular relevance for us, of course, are the studies that examined eugenic ideologies as

an aspect of western imperial domination of the globe in the twentieth century, most notably Laura Briggs recent work on the ideological dimensions of U.S. scientific intervention in Puerto Rico.³ Comparative studies, as well as investigations of the links among various national movements, are also shedding new light on both the social and scientific underpinnings of eugenics. There are also calls for a reevaluation of aspects of the standard historical model of the development of the movement, which include both an effort to broaden the notion of "eugenics" under a more encompassing model of social control and a reconsideration of the purely hereditarian cast of efforts at eugenic reform.

The work of the Human Betterment Foundation will be an important part of this larger story of eugenics, and I look forward to the forthcoming book by Alexandra Stern on the history of the California sterilization movement to further our knowledge of details of the role of the HBF in creating ongoing support for the sterilization movement in California. The history of the Human Betterment Foundation, however, also bears additional scrutiny in the context that we are discussing today: the role of philanthropic foundations in the globalization of western medicine and public health. In particular, I want to discuss the Human Betterment Foundation's role as a worldwide promoter of eugenic sterilization, and its association with a successor organization, the Human Betterment Association for Voluntary Sterilization.

To begin this discussion, let me provide a brief history of the Human Betterment Foundation (henceforth the HBF). E. S. Gosney was the founder and President of the HBF, a non-profit organization chartered in 1929 "to foster and aid constructive and educational forces for the protection and betterment of the human family in body, mind, character, and citizenship." These theoretical goals were put into practice primarily

through the distribution of literature on eugenic sterilization, particularly detailed case studies drawn from the sterilizations of those judged mentally defective under the California sterilization laws passed in 1909. During the period of its operation, the Foundation undertook research on the physiological, mental, and social effects of sterilization, and distributed informational pamphlets on eugenic sterilization and social hygiene.

Ezra Seymour Gosney was in 1855, graduated from Richmond College in Missouri in 1877, and took a law degree from the St. Louis School of Law three years later. Gosney eventually settled in the territory of Arizona. There he set up a successful law practice in Flagstaff, and also became involved in the financing of a number of businesses, particularly in the sheep and cattle breeding industry. He organized the Arizona Wool Growers' Association to fight for the rights of small stock farmers who faced elimination at the hand of land speculators and the railroad companies.⁴ Around 1905, Gosney began spending his winters in Pasadena and soon decided to relocate to Southern California, in part to provide a more refined environment for the education of his two daughters. He quickly became a leading member of the Pasadena business community, buying up citrus fields and real estate in the still sparsely populated San Gabriel valley, east of Los Angeles. In 1906, he became the principle financier and chairman of the board of trustees of the Polytechnic Elementary School, an institution dedicated to providing high quality elementary education. Gosney also became very active in the leadership of the California branch of the Boy Scouts of America.

While in Pasadena, Gosney became a close associate of Paul Popenoe, who was then serving as the director of the Institute of Family Relations in Los Angeles. Popenoe is a

very significant figure in the history of American eugenics and the internationalization of the eugenic ideology. I'll have more to say about him in a moment. Together, Popenoe and Gosney began an extended study of the medical, legal, and social aspects of the sterilizations being carried out under the terms of the California Sterilization Laws at the Sonoma State Hospital and other state institutions. The results of this work, entitled "Sterilization for Human Betterment," were published in 1929. In that same year, Gosney set up the HBF and gathered a membership of twenty-five leading California scientists and philanthropists including Popenoe, as well as Lewis Terman, David Starr Jordan, William B. Munro, Otis Castle and C.M. Goethe.

During the next thirteen years, the HBF continued to carry out research on the effects of sterilization and undertook widespread distribution of their pamphlet "Sterilization for Human Betterment" to individuals, public libraries, and schools both in the United States and internationally. During this period, ties between the HBF and its Pasadena neighbor, the California Institute of Technology, also began to grow. Caltech's president, Robert Millikan, shared aspects of Gosney's vision for human progress; he also had an eye for potential donors to Caltech, and joined the board of directors of the HBF in 1937. Gosney also courted Thomas Hunt Morgan, then director of Caltech's Division of Biological Sciences, for Morgan's support for the Foundation during the early 1940s.⁵

Gosney's daughter, Lois Gosney Castle assumed the leadership of the Foundation upon her father's death in 1942. Together with the HBF's Board of Trustees, she decided to liquidate the assets of the Foundation and turn the proceeds over to Caltech. In 1943, an agreement was drawn up between the HBF and Caltech, wherein Caltech agreed to use the Foundation's assets to set up the Gosney research fund, which would be administered

by Caltech's Division of Biology. This fellowship, intended to carry on the spirit of the Foundation's work for human betterment, has been used to support post-doctoral research "in those branches of biological science basic to our understanding of human welfare."⁶

So the Human Betterment Foundation existed for only the brief span of fourteen years, only the blink of an eye in comparison to the endurance of many philanthropic foundations. And yet the HBF during its day played an extremely critical role both the promotion of the sterilization laws already on the books in California, and in the growing international interest in sterilization as a means of eugenic improvement and public health. In this regard Paul Popenoe was the key player. Based on the Archival records of the HBF, it is clear that while Gosney may have been the financial and ideological inspiration for the Human Betterment Foundation, it was Popenoe who was its main voice and its primary promoter both in the United States and around the world. Popenoe was a tireless advocate of eugenics during the 1920s and the 1930s, and he corresponded extensively with leaders of the American eugenics movement and with a dizzying number of international admirers. Letters in the HBF archives to the Foundation and to Popenoe come from every area of the world, including Africa, Asia Minor, Central and South America, China, Russia, and Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Islands. While neither Popenoe nor Gosney had any medical training, the efforts of the Human Betterment Foundation were especially directed toward doctors. The Foundation sponsored research on the effects both of salpingectomy (now more commonly referred to as a tubal ligation) and vasectomy, including both the physical and the psychological affects of sterilization on subjects. Their efforts were primarily focused on convincing doctors of the safety and ease of surgical sterilization. Judging from the letters to the Foundation from

international sources, the Foundation was effective at promoting their ideas to doctors working around the world, many of whom were quite proficient in English, indicating perhaps that they had been trained in the US or had indigenous medical training but in colonial medical facilities.⁷

By the late 1930s, the vigor of the Human Betterment Foundation began to wane, due largely to the failing health of Ezra Gosney himself and the increasingly tense international situation regarding Adolf Hitler. The HBF had pursued very active ties with the Nazis in the early 1930s. In 1937, Dr. Fritz Lenz, a leading German medical geneticist, wrote to Gosney to thank him for sending his latest data on the California sterilization program, since “these practical experiences are also very valuable for us in Germany.” A leading donor to the HBF, C. M. Goethe, visited Nazi Germany in the mid-1930s, and reported to Gosney that the HBF’s work “had a powerful part in shaping the opinion of the group of intellectuals who are behind Hitler . . . you have really jolted into action a great government of 60,000,000 people.”⁸ By the latter part of the decade, however, the HBF began to back off of direct connections with the Nazi eugenics program. In a letter dated 9 September 1940, Gosney wrote: “We have little in this country to consider in racial integrity. Germany is pushing that. We should steer clear of it lest we should be misunderstood.”⁹ Nonetheless, Gosney and Popenoe continued to support sterilization as a viable means of eugenics, both at home and abroad.

Although the Human Betterment Foundation was dissolved in 1943, the efforts that the Foundation had made promoting eugenic sterilization, especially among the medical community, were continued by two successor Foundations: Birthright, Inc., based in Princeton NJ, and the Human Betterment Association of America Inc. based in New

York City. This organization has gone through a series of subtle and not so subtle name changes, first to the Human Betterment Association for Voluntary Sterilization, then the Association for Voluntary Sterilization, Inc.; it is still in operation, based in New York City and operating under the name EngenderHealth (an organization that now has as its slogan “Improving Women’s Health Worldwide”). Birthright received most of the records of the Human Betterment Foundation regarding its work on sterilization programs on the United States. Birthright also continued to receive the financial and spiritual support of C.M. Goethe. The Human Betterment Association for Voluntary Sterilization took up the mission of the HBF in promoting sterilization internationally. Among its sponsors were Lois Gosney Castle, Goethe, and Popenoe, It was during this period, beginning in the middle of the 1940s and increasing in speed in the years immediately after the war, that the American eugenics movement reformulated itself along two fronts: first, as promoters of a reductionist biological science that would eventually help to foster the origins of modern molecular biology, and secondly, most relevant for our purposes, as promoters of a new worldwide population control movement.

In a letter dated 31 May 1949, Columbia University professor Maurice A. Bigelow, past president of the American Eugenics Society, wrote a letter to Popenoe concerning the expansion of eugenic sterilization around the world since the end of WWII. He begins his letter by noting “I just received your big letter of May 14 containing articles on various countries. I think we can use all of them in the September-December 1948 (issue of *Eugenical News*) which I am getting ready at the printer. I have the page proofs for the March-June, 1948, including the article on Japanese sterilization.” Later in the letter he

noted that “Osborn, Lorimer, and Kiser and possibly other population men will furnish material for the March 1949 *Eugenical News*. They will base it on some papers which are to be read at the next meeting of the Population Association.¹⁰ Popenoe by that time had begun writing popular articles on marriage counseling for magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal*, where he initiated the “Can This Marriage Be Saved” column that continues to run today. But he also continued his promotion of sterilization, now in the form of voluntary sterilization. He was listed as a member of the “Legal and Scientific Committee” on the letterhead of the Human Betterment Association for Voluntary Sterilization into the 1960s. In the late 1940s, the HBAVS began a more aggressive program for the promotion of sterilization as a means of international population control. In November of 1963, H. Curtis Wood, M.D. the President of the Association wrote to Popenoe to report on the progress: “Our New York office is located in the New York Academy of Medicine; we are furnishing the Population Division of the Social Affairs Department of the United Nations with mimeograph copies of all state sterilization laws, Puerto Rico, and Japan, for use in their legal monograph to be published in 1951. In the November issue of the AMA Journal you will find an article by Dr. Clarence J. Gamble based on Birthright’s publication #5, “Sterilizations Officially Reported January 1st, 1949”¹¹ In 1963, Robert W. Laidlaw, M.D., President of the Human Betterment Association for Voluntary Sterilization opened a fund raising letter for the Association by noting that “The population of the world in mid-1963 is approximately 3,180,000,000. The increase of 185 million people in only three years almost equals the total population of the United States! . . . much of our activity since our founding in 1937 has been

dedicated to educational programs designed to make know the benefits of voluntary sterilization and its growing acceptance throughout the world.”¹²

The involvement of organizations the HBAVS in international population control efforts became for direct in the 1970s. In 1973, the foundation, now under the name the Association for Voluntary Sterilization, Inc. organized an international conference in Geneva on voluntary sterilization around the world. By late 1973, it had begun twelve projects in San Salvador, Guatemala, Iran, Thailand, Colombia, Ecuador and Taiwan.¹³ Since then the organization, now operating under the name EngenderHealth, has expanded its operations to more than ninety countries. The organization describes its ongoing activities in Bangladesh in the following terms:

EngenderHealth has been working in Bangladesh since 1974 to improve family health and reduce overall fertility rates in Bangladesh. We work in partnership with several cooperating agencies and the National Integrated Population and Health Program (NIPHP), a state organization with the goal of reducing poverty and thereby increasing self-reliance among the people of Bangladesh.¹⁴

While the involvement of NGOs like EngenderHealth in the internationalization of public health in the form of voluntary sterilization may not seem remarkable, understanding the history of organizations such as this should certainly raise our awareness of the subtly of ideological and political agendas that might be pursued in the name of public health. To again quote EngenderHealth current literature, in this case on some of its domestic programs aimed at “low-income” markets:

Our research has also enabled us to develop social marketing campaigns that are specifically targeted to local populations. For example, our work with a health facility in Colorado taught us that low-income men were not accessing services. Through our efforts, social marketing materials were developed that specifically responded to the needs expressed by this population . . . Since 1996, EngenderHealth has been providing training in social marketing techniques and technical guidance to the Young Men's Clinic (YMC), a facility in New York City's Washington Heights area . . . [we] produce[d] a series of cartoons addressing current sexual health issues aimed at both young women and men in

the Washington Heights community, a predominantly Hispanic and low-income neighborhood.¹⁵

As I am suggesting, one need not read very deep into statements such as these to see the possibility, at least, of a continuity of aims with earlier eugenic sterilization. Of course current programs, both at home and abroad, are carried out under the banner of “voluntary” sterilization. Public education campaigns such as these, however, might cast some doubt upon the degree to which those subjected to them are fully capable of making free choices. That such choices might be even less free internationally, under the supervision of frequently repressive political regimes, would hardly be surprising. Adding to these concerns, of course, is the very power of westernized medicine and its agenda of public health. When such ideas are pitched to indigenous populations under the banner of the United Nations, and buttressed by the instrumental effectiveness in many areas of life, the situation potentially becomes all the more worrisome.

In 2002, EngenderHealth received the Population Award from the United Nations. In a statement congratulating the Foundation on this award, Assistant Secretary-General for External Relations, Gillian Sorensen, delivered the following message on behalf of Kofi Annan:

EngenderHealth, formerly known as AVSC International, was established in 1943 and initially worked to ensure that American couples could choose surgical sterilization and that these services were voluntary and safe. In 1973, EngenderHealth broadened its geographic scope to work in the developing world, where it has introduced and expanded access to safe and voluntary sterilization services in more than 90 countries. In large part due to EngenderHealth’s pioneering work, sterilization is the most prevalent method of contraception worldwide.¹⁶

In thinking about the role of Foundations in globalizing western medicine and public health, it seems only appropriate to reflect on the fact the sterilization has become the dominant form of birth control around the world. One certainly could argue whether the

history of medical sterilization, and its association with eugenics and coercive state sponsored programs, is really relevant to the current practice of sterilization as a voluntary means of family planning. Without question there is a clear difference between individuals making free choices about their reproductive desires and state sponsored forced sterilization. Even if we set the true freedom of individual choices aside, however, when family planning becomes a state sponsored or an internationally encouraged form of population control, the history of eugenic sterilization should at least be brought to mind, especially when one considers the role of Foundations and other NGOs in promoting these practices.

¹Portions of this essay have been previously published as “Eugenic Science in California: The Papers of E. S. Gosney and the Human Betterment Foundation” in *The Mendel Newsletter. Archival Resources for the History of Genetics and Allied Sciences* New Series, No. 5 (February 1996), pp. 13-15.

²Mike Anton, “Forced Sterilizations Once Seen as a Path to a Better World; Decades of files on mental patients reveal how a group of noted Californians hoped to influence the fate of the human race.” *Los Angeles Times* 16 July 2003. Main News; Part 1, p 1.

³Laura Biggs, *Reproducing Empire: Race, Sex, Science, and U.S. Imperialism in Puerto Rico* (University of California, 2002).

⁴Information of Gosney's life can be found in the E.S. Gosney collection as well as the papers of Lois Gosney Castle Troendle, and in the archives historical files under "Gosney, Ezra Seymour (1855-1942), in the Institute Archives of the California Institute of Technology.

⁵Human Betterment Foundation Papers, Box 1.4. Institute Archives, California Institute of Technology.

⁶George Wells Beadle, "The Gosney Research Fund," *Engineering and Science*, 10 (May 1947), 27.

⁷Human Betterment Foundation Papers, Correspondence Files, Boxes 5-10. Institute Archives, California Institute of Technology.

⁸Correspondence from the Human Betterment Foundation Papers cited in Anton, “Forced Sterilization,” p. 1.

⁹Human Betterment Foundation Papers, Box 1.2. . Institute Archives, California Institute of Technology.

¹⁰M.A. Bigelow to Paul Popenoe, 31 May 1949. Popenoe Papers, Box 10. American Heritage Center.

¹¹H. Curtis Wood to Paul Popenoe, 30 November 1949, Popenoe Papers, Box 11. American Heritage Center.

¹² Robert W. Laidlaw, M.D. to Medora Steedman Bass, 4 November 1963. Medora Steedman Bass Papers, Box #2. American Heritage Center

¹³Special Appeal fundraising letter from Helen Edey, M.D. Chairman of the AVS, October 1973, Medora Steedman Bass Paper, Box #3, American Heritage Center.

¹⁴EngenderHealth Website, <http://www.engenderhealth.org/ia/cbc/bangladesh.html>. Accessed 6/1/04

¹⁵*Ibid.* http://www.engenderhealth.org/ia/cbc/united_states.html

¹⁶United Nations Press Release dated 1/07/02. SG/SM/8296 POP/833. Available at <http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2002/sgsm8296.doc.htm>. Accessed 6/2/04.