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Artificial insemination and eugenics: celibate motherhood, eutelegenesis and germinal choice

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the history of artificial insemination by selected donors (AID) as a strategy for positive eugenic improvement. While medical artificial insemination has a longer history, its use as a eugenic strategy was first mooted in late nineteenth-century France. It was then developed as 'scientific motherhood' for war widows and those without partners by Marion Louisa Piddington in Australia following the Great War. By the 1930s AID was being more widely used clinically in Britain (and elsewhere) as a medical solution to male infertility for married couples. In 1935 English postal clerk, Herbert Brewer, promoted AID (eutelegenesis) as the socialization of the germ plasm in a eugenic scheme. The next year Hermann Muller, American Drosophila geneticist and eugenicist, presented his plan for human improvement by AID to Stalin. Some twenty years later, Muller, together with Robert Klark Graham, began planning a Foundation for Germinal Choice in California. This was finally opened in 1980 as the first practical experiment in eugenic AID, producing some 215 babies over the twenty years it functioned. While AID appeared to be a means of squaring a eugenic circle by separating paternity from love relationships, and so allowing eugenic improvement without inhibiting individual choice in marriage, it found very little favour with those who might use it, not least because of a couple's desire to have their 'own' children has always seemed stronger than any eugenic aspirations. No state has ever contemplated using AID as a social policy.

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1. Introduction

The idea of artificial insemination (AI) by selected donors has a long history in eugenics. Since the late nineteenth century it has been mooted as a technique for positive eugenic population enhancement which separated paternity from love relationships. While it might preserve individual choice in marriage, this was at the cost of male (genetic) parentage. Many opposed these moves beyond the usual order of reproduction, and a century passed between the first promotion of AI as a positive eugenic strategy and the launch of the only practical eugenic experiment, in the USA in 1980. By this time artificial insemination by donor (AID)[1] was widely accepted as a possible medical answer to male infertility in couples, for facilitating motherhood for women without male partners and a way in which fertile couples at risk of transmitting a serious disease through the paternal line could have healthy children. The history I explore here is focussed on Britain but includes some necessary excursions to Australia, Russia and the USA, as well as an initial French connection. Indeed, it is a history which illustrates some of the links of eugenic thought and practice between these countries and the personal and professional networks of its advocates.

The distinction between positive eugenics (the promotion of reproduction of the fit) and negative eugenics (the limitation of reproduction of the unfit) has been widely drawn. While negative eugenics involved programmes of constraint and intervention for

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[1] From the 1970s it has generally been known as donor insemination (DI).

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those regarded as unfit—the segregation in institutions of the 'feeble minded' in Britain, their sterilization, together with that of criminals and other moral transgressors in the USA and in Scandinavia, for example—positive eugenics seldom moved beyond education and exhortations for wise marriage. Francis Galton argued, in his Huxley lecture of 1901, that the augmenting of favoured stock to improve the race was far more important than 'repressing' the productivity of the worst. He suggested that this might be done by granting of diplomas on the basis of physical and intellectual examinations to the fit and encouraging their intermarriage by dowries, provision of healthy homes and through the pressure of public opinion (Galton, 1909). Most eugenicists retreated from these utopian fantasies and were more hesitant in suggesting any direct interventions that might impinge on the love relationships and marriages of the fit. For example, in 1923 Major Leonard Darwin (son of Charles, and President of the Eugenics Education Society 1911–1929) in his keynote address to the Second Congress of Eugenics urged that:

> Great care should, however, always be taken to indicate that, though our experiences in the stock-yard enable us better to understand the laws of natural inheritance, yet our reliance on these laws carries with it no implications whatever that the methods of the animal breeders ought to be introduced into human society ... Pure love between the sexes should be proclaimed as the noblest thing on earth, and the bearing and rearing of children as amongst the highest of all human duties. (Darwin, 1923, pp. 9–10)

The fit, but not the unfit, were of course, the eugenicists themselves and their own kind. Or as Raymond Pearl put it in his well known critique of American eugenics,

> It should be said that by superior people, whether individuals, classes, or races, [eugenicists] seems always to be meant either:
>
> a. 'My kind of people,' or
> b. 'People whom I happen to like' (Pearl, 1927, p. 261)

The technology of AID, at least in theory, could square this eugenic circle. Individuals could remain free to make their own marriage choices, while AI from carefully chosen donors might offer eugenic enhancement for their children. By this method, the enhancement would be limited to the male line, and couples using the technique must forego the husband's own biological parentage and rely on the conventional (and legal) presumption of paternity.[2] Moreover, the reproductive intervention employed might be considered distasteful or worse.

Histories of the medical use of AI conventionally place the first recorded practice with John Hunter's insemination of a woman with her husband's semen in 1790, and the experiments of the American surgeon, James Marion Sims in 1866 (Schellen, 1957; Bartholomew, 1958; Wilmot, 2007). Its eugenic use was first suggested in the 1880s by George Vacher de Lapouge (1854–1934). An amateur anthropologist and librarian at Montpellier University (and subsequently at Rennes and Poitiers), Vacher de Lapouge developed a scientific racial doctrine of 'anthroposociology'. A follower of Darwin and Galton, he believed that the processes of natural selection had been halted in society by medicine and welfare increasing the survival of the 'unfit' and that this led to racial degeneration. He proposed that the trend could be reversed by curbing the reproduction of the unfit and encouraging that of the fit. This included a plan for artificial insemination using males of 'absolute perfection' to inseminate women worthy of perpetuating the race (Vacher de Lapouge, 1896). A controversial figure, his racial theories were much criticised. His idea of using AI as a eugenic strategy found little resonance with other eugenicists at home or abroad. However, the Holy Office of the Catholic Church saw fit to condemn AI in 1897. Vacher de Lapouge's career was jeopardised not only because he was seen as 'un esprit bizarre' but also because of allegations of indecency related to his photographic studies of racial types (Ackerknecht, 1950; Clark, 1981; Schneider, 1990). He later abandoned anthropology and turned to the study of beetles, to which he made distinguished contributions.

2. Scientific motherhood

Early in the twentieth century a rather different eugenic scheme involving AID was proposed in Australia to counter the dysgenic effects of the Great War. Marion Louisa Piddington's (1809–1950) 'scientific' or 'celibate motherhood' involved AID for widows and single women unable to find husbands because of the casualties of the war (Curthoys, 1989).

Piddington had become enthused by eugenics during a visit to Britain in 1912 which happened to coincide with the First International Eugenics Congress in London. In 1916 she published *Via nuova, or Science and maternity* under the pen name of Lois. In this novella, the heroine Kathleen O'Connor, whose husband had been killed carrying a wounded comrade into safety, resolved

> To assist nature ... and to produce the highest type of human being ... without interfering in any way with the sanctity of marriage or the sacredness of home life ... She now invoked the aid of Science to repair [the] ravages [of war] by performing the bee-like task of conveying the gift of life to the secret sanctum of its expectant seclusion ... [The result was a bouncing, bright-eyed boy who at the age of twelve is told of] the nature of his birth [and the unknown] earthly father [who] was of so noble a nature that, with complete unselfishness, gave you the strong heart, the clear brain, and healthy body which make you enjoy life, and which renders you so able to resist sickness and disease, and so happy because of your perfect health, and which will enable you to pass on to your children the same healthiness of mind and body which you enjoy. (Lois, 1916, pp. 7, 13)

The story ends with Kathleen's peaceful death surrounded by her son, now married, and his own healthy and happy children.

Together with the novella, *Via nuova* includes an account of Piddington's scheme for scientific motherhood and her plan for a Eugenic Institute which would run it. The Institute would hold records of all births and the donors whose names would be privy to the President of the Institute and the doctors who would carry out the inseminations. 'Scientific children' would require permission of the Institute to marry to avoid the possibility of intermarriage of step brothers and sisters. The Institute would provide mothers with an allowance of £3 a week so that they could be independent, and birth certificates for their children to ensure that mothers avoided any possible stigma and to secure the children's legitimacy.[3] *Via nuova* was followed by a pamphlet under her own name, *Scientific motherhood: For the lonely woman and childless widows after*

[2] In England it was not until in 1987 (Family Law Reforms Act 1987 and Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990) that the law established that the partner of a woman who was inseminated with donor sperm was the legal father of the child and the donor was freed from financial responsibility for any children born from donated sperm, provided that the treatment is carried out in a licensed fertility clinic.

[3] Effectively the same arrangements were set up under the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act (1990) whereby the HFE Authority has registers of donors and births and may be approached by any adult to see if they were conceived by donation and, if so, if they are related to their would-be partner. AID in a HFEA clinic ensures that the mother's (male) partner is the legal father of the child and legitimises the birth of a fatherless child if the mother is single.