Female sexuality: A historical approach (Part 1)

Working medical English is also improving English vocabulary in others fields than only obstetrics of course. English articles about sexuality, and especially female sexuality are a very interesting way to read English.

We present to you this month the first part of an article, “The historical response to female sexuality” issued in the medical journal Maturitas. Its goal is to understand the medical and historical approach and how in the past and for centuries medical attitudes to female sexuality were totally inappropriate.

**Devil, serpent and female sexuality**

“In medieval times people feared three things: the devil, hunger, and women. Female sexuality was a particular source of anxiety for men, a prejudice which continued until the beginning of the twentieth century. Wilmot (1775) in “Nymphomania, or the furor uterinus”, outlined the dangers to women and society from the serious medical disease of “that horrible distemper” nymphomania. Details of female anatomy and function seem to be surprisingly well informed for the period, but it is the condemnation of a normal robust sexuality which seems eccentric to us today. We are told that female sexuality is a serpent that is secretly guided into the heart. Goethe, at about the same time, writing of syphilis, uses similar imagery, demonizing the disease as a beast and warning of “a serpent which lurks in the loveliest of gardens and strikes us at our pleasures”.

**Status of women**

Later, the inferior intellectual status of women was supported by the great and the good in academia. Edward Clark, Professor of psychiatry at Harvard in 1873, wrote that all higher education for girls was unhealthy and unnaturally. He thought that if women chose to pursue an academic life or even secondary education there was shunting of blood from the uterus to the brain which made them depressed, infertile and irritable. Henry Maudsley, the most distinguished psychiatrist in London during this time, spoke about the evils of menstruation on the intellect in a notorious publication in the following year. He believed that with 1 week in the month being sick and unfit for hard work, they were not able to function. He wrote that when nature spends in one direction she must economise in another believing that women were not able to regain the “vital energy” that was directly spent on learning and if they attempted to achieve the education standards of men she would lack energy for child bearing and rearing. It is no wonder that the most brilliant female authors of the time, Maryanne Evans, Charlotte Bronte, Anne Bronte and Emily Bronte had to write under the male pen names of George Eliot, Currer Bell, Acton Bell and Ellis Bell respectively.

**Vocabulary**

- Beast : bête.
- Belief : croyance.
- Child bearing : porter des enfants.
- Demonizing : diabolisant.
- Devil : diable.
- Disease : maladie.
- Distemper : trouble, désordre de l’humeur.
- Evil : mal.
- Fashion : mode.
- Hunger : faim, famine.
- Obvious : évident.
- Rearing : (les) éléver.
- Removal : ablation.
- Sexual fantasies : fantasmes sexuels.
- Threat : menace.
- To fear : craindre, redouter.
- To lurk : éper.
- To outline : décrire.
- To strike : frapper.

**Problems of “menstrual madness”**

The belief that menstruation and sexuality had a deleterious effect upon the intellect was echoed by the belief that the serious female disorders of nymphomania, masturbation, moral insanity, hysteria and neurasthenia were a serious threat to health and life and were considered to be the result of reading inappropriate novels or playing romantic music. To these clearly sexual disorders the problems of “menstrual madness” and insanity were added. As these problems were clearly due to the female characteristics of the individual, the treatment was obvious; the removal of the offending organs. There followed a fashion for removing the normal ovary and the clitoris which led to one of the great medical scandals of the 19th century. Charcot, with his public demonstrations of hysteria in women in the 1870s, emphasized his belief that most mental disease in women resulted from abnormalities or excitation of the female external genitalia. These clinical tutorials were attended by scores of men who must have witnessed in pornographic detail the role of the vulva and clitoris in the causation of hysterical attacks in Charcot’s young, and if we are to believe contemporary illustrations, attractive patients. Charcot’s pupil, Sigmund Freud, attended these demonstrations at La Salpêtrière for 5 months, repeating this fashionable view of the external genitalia as causation of mental problems while later stressing the effect of the mind on gynaecological and mental disease. There is good evidence that even Freud modified his case histories excluding the realities of deviant sexuality and sexual abuse of children replacing them with sexual fantasies and dreams which would be much more acceptable to the Viennese upper and middle class who was his audience.

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To be continued next month in your favorite magazine “Vocation Sage-Femme”, in your next Midwife’s corner.

**Note**