

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Communications on reproduction: from secrets of women to population arithmetic

Documenting the relationship between reproduction and the media, the exhibition 'Books and Babies: Communicating Reproduction', at the Cambridge University Library in Cambridge, UK opened in July 2011. It will run until 23 December 2011, extensive documentation being available at <http://www.lib.cam.ac.uk/exhibitions/Babies>.

SHARING BELIEFS

A clay figurine of a woman holding her breasts is thought to have been used around 600 BC in Syria for communicating with the gods to fulfil wishes regarding reproduction. Whereas William Harvey had postulated in 1651 that an egg was the origin of every living organism, it was not until 1827 that von Baer discovered the mammalian egg as documented in a copper engraving.

The theories of Aristotle on generation, an earlier but broader term for reproduction, and numerous other myths pertaining to secrets of women, were transmitted over centuries through learning institutions that exploited their privileged status. Even when targeting women, gynaecology texts were often written in monasteries and used by medical practitioners.

REVEALING SECRETS

Aristotle's *Masterpiece* resulted from a 'copy and paste' job from two publications in 1684 by an 'anonymous hack': its popularity, until the 1930s, was from women for getting advice, men for seeking secrets and boys for satisfying curiosity. The frontispiece of an 1850 edition consists of a lightly-dressed woman who complements learning from Aristotle at a desk.

As an early man-midwife, William Hunter discovered some secrets of women by dissecting human cadavers. The vivid engravings¹ in his book of

1774 depict abdominopelvic details during late pregnancy (Figure 1).

CONTROLLING FERTILITY

In 1850, Charles Darwin described his successful use of chloroform on his wife who had been busy "these two days past in producing a fourth boy Darwin and seventh child!". The annotations by Darwin in his copy of *An Essay on the Principle of Population* by Malthus attest to his meticulous attention to the text.

In his *Political Arithmetick*, William Petty promoted a population-based quantitative approach to economics² in the late 17th century. Around 1900, there was a related movement "to campaign against national degeneration" and fundraising by overseas missionaries was justified by the moral duty and imperial role of Britain in improving the reproductive health of native communities in colonies through (1) the training of midwives to manage birth complications, (2) the control of sexually transmitted infections and (3) an increase in the birth rate and improvement of the "breeding stock".³

When eugenics was discredited after the Second World War, population control gained popularity but setbacks occurred when individual rights were not respected. Robert Edwards pioneered *in vitro* fertilisation from cramped offices where "windows had to remain closed, lest the wind disturb the loose leaves": success in 1978 resulted in a five-page feature in the *Daily Mail* within 2 days but more than 2 years later for an article in a professional journal. With the world population about to reach 7 billion, population control is making the headlines again and it was apt to be reminded of the 1972 film on *Zero Population Growth*, which is now easily accessible in a DVD version of 2008.



Figure 1 The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus. William Hunter (1718–1783). Birmingham: John Baskerville, 1774. Path.aa.5. Figure reproduced with the kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

Reviewed by **Lindsay Edouard**
International Advisory Editor, Port Louis, Mauritius;
soranae@gmail.com

Competing interests None.

Provenance and peer review Commissioned; internally peer reviewed.

J Fam Plann Reprod Health Care 2011;**37**:245.
doi:10.1136/jfprhc-2011-100194

REFERENCES

- 1 **Hunter W.** *The Anatomy of the Human Gravid Uterus, Exhibited in Figures*. Birmingham, UK: John Baskerville, 1774.
- 2 **Petty W.** *Political Arithmetick, or a Discourse Concerning the Extent and Value of Lands, People, Buildings*. London, UK: Clavel and Mortlock, 1690.
- 3 **Cook AR.** *A Doctor and His Dog in Uganda*. London, UK: Religious Tracts Society, 1903.