

Public Health Then and Now

Margaret Sanger: Birth Control's Successful Revolutionary

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Abstract: The year 1979 marked the centennial of Margaret Sanger, birth control pioneer. Sanger worked to secure two new human rights: the right to decide whether to have a child and the right of a child to be wanted.

Beginning in 1873, antipornography crusader Anthony Comstock lobbied through Congress and the state legislatures laws forbidding the distribution of contraceptive devices and even information. He equated these with erotic postcards as "obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, indecent and disgusting."

Sanger's strategy was to challenge the Comstock laws in the courts. She studied birth control methods abroad and published a pamphlet, *Family Limitation*, in 1914. It was the first modern marriage manual; it

was also illegal. The publicity her trial generated was immense and highly sympathetic. The government dropped its case when it saw it could only make her a martyr.

An obstetrical nurse, Sanger had seen the plight of factory women in the poorest sections of New York City. In order to provide the medical advice and supplies women clamored for, Sanger opened the first U.S. birth control clinic, in Brooklyn in 1916. The New York City Vice Squad raided and closed it, and jailed Sanger.

Margaret Sanger underwent other trials, raids, and harassments, but each time won additional public support for her organization—Planned Parenthood—and her cause. (*Am J Public Health* 1980; 70:736-742.)

The year 1979 marked the centennial of two people who altered the course of our lives and of our planet. Einstein's centenary was celebrated in March. Margaret Sanger—remarkable and controversial pioneer of birth control—was born on September 14th, 1879. Sanger's path crossed Einstein's on at least two occasions. In 1922, along with Bertrand Russell and H. G. Wells, they toured Japan, lecturing as leaders of Western thought. And in 1952 Einstein headed the group of prestigious American sponsors for Sanger's major international birth-control conference, which continues today as the International Planned Parenthood Federation.

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Photographs courtesy of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc., and Planned Parenthood-World Population, 810 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019.

The magnitude of Sanger's achievement is difficult to comprehend today. She worked to secure new human rights: the right of every woman to control her fertility, the right of parents to be free of the crises of unwanted pregnancy, and the right of every child to be wanted. Additionally, she provided the birth control methods and clinics necessary for the practical realization of these rights. "Birth Control," Sanger said, "concerns itself with the spirit no less than the body. It looks for the liberation of the spirit of the woman and through woman of the child."¹

Her life-long crusade began in 1912, before the phrase "birth control" had been invented, and when the words "prevention of conception" were taboo. Sanger was heaped with abuse, but also, increasingly, with lavish praise. Within her own lifetime she turned a forlorn hope into a successfully accomplished revolution. When she received her first major honor, the Medal of Achievement of the American Women's Association in 1931, the citation recognized that she "fought a battle single handed . . . a pioneer of pioneers."²



Margaret Sanger, at age 37 in 1916, opened the first birth control clinic in the U.S.

*"My life has been joyous and exulting and full because it has touched profoundly millions of other lives. It is ever a privilege to be a part of something unquestionably proved of value, something so fundamentally right."*⁴

Sanger Biographies: Pro and Con

Even in death Sanger generates controversy. Her biographies—and even the immense collection of primary material she left—provide fertile ground for historians in search of the "real" Margaret Sanger.

Sanger gave 200 boxes of letters, journals, and other memorabilia to Smith College, and an equal quantity is stored in the Library of Congress. She nevertheless made her tracks hard to follow: she altered dates (such as her birth date, apparently to make herself younger) and retold stories to suit her own, often obscure designs. Sanger's own books, *My Fight for Birth Control*³ and *Autobiography*,⁴ are essential sources, but also propaganda for her crusade. In one of her scribbled notes she prophetically warned: "My biography will be harder to write than that of Havelock Ellis, be-

cause I am not consistent and I have seldom revealed what I really feel or believe."⁵

Among Sanger biographers, charges of "hagiography," "mythology," and "denigration" are common. Each biographer's perspective and politics need to be borne in mind when evaluating their portraits of this highly complicated person. Lawrence Lader interviewed Sanger for *The Margaret Sanger Story*;⁶ he focuses narrowly, but not inappropriately, on her family planning work, and omits any hint of the notoriety of her personal life. Emily Taft Douglas's more recent *Margaret Sanger: Pioneer of the Future*² and Virginia Coigney's *Margaret Sanger: Rebel with a Cause*⁷ are, again, admiring portraits of a miracle worker.

James Reed's *From Private Vice to Public Virtue*⁸ is an up-to-date and sound source for the history of contraception. Only one-third of the book deals with Sanger's role, the other key figures being Drs. Robert Dickinson and Clarence Gamble. Reed's work amplifies on and corrects certain notions in the ground-breaking *Birth Control in America*⁹ by David Kennedy and also points out Kennedy's curious animus against Sanger.

Other biographers dwell on Sanger's clay feet. Madeline Gray's centennial book, *Margaret Sanger: A Biography of the Champion of Birth Control*,⁵ leaves the impression that Sanger's work on birth control was incidental (since, as Gray points out, Sanger needed it herself) to her continuous and passionate love affairs. Gray's intimate revelations of Sanger's personal life would make an unusually long and lively soap opera.

The lowest estimate of Sanger and her efforts is in Linda Gordon's *Woman's Body, Woman's Right*.¹⁰ Gordon is outspokenly Marxist-feminist, and the open-minded reader tends to share James Reed's opinion that "Gordon treats the activities of a large number of organizations and individuals ranging from the Planned Parenthood Federation of America to the Population Council to Hugh Moore as one vast and undifferentiated conspiracy in the service of political repression and American imperialism."⁸

One is left with the impression that, in spite of all the Sanger material in circulation, a definitive biography and assessment has yet to be written.

Up from Corning

Margaret Higgins, born in Corning, New York, was one of the 11 children of Irish immigrants. Her father carved tombstone angels and headstones for church cemeteries. His income dried up, however, as he became known as the town atheist. Margaret shared his questioning mind, outspokenness, and willingness to face the consequences.

Her mother had 18 pregnancies, growing weaker and sicker each time before she died in her 40s. Margaret decided to become a doctor and rescue people suffering like her mother, but there was no money. During nursing training she was swept off her feet and into a surprise marriage ceremony by an adoring architectural draftsman named William Sanger. Living a modest but comfortable suburban existence in Hastings-on-Hudson with three beautiful and much-wanted

children, she longed for the intellectual ferment of the city and a chance to use her nursing skills. Her husband regretfully sold the house he had built for her, and the Sangers moved to New York City.

The Sachs Case

The tragic case of Sadie Sachs is a well-known moment in the Sanger "saga." As Sanger herself saw it, the Sachs case marked the turning point of her life and the beginning of the U.S. birth control movement. She tells the story in her autobiography.⁴

One hot day in 1912 she received an urgent call. In an East-Side tenement she found Mrs. Sachs, the 28-year-old wife of a truck driver and mother of three, near death from blood poisoning following a self-induced abortion. It was two weeks before the crisis was past, and three before Sanger could leave her round-the-clock duty in the tiny, waterless flat.

The pale and grave Mrs. Sachs asked, "Another baby will finish me, I suppose?"

The doctor strongly agreed, "Any more capers, young woman, and there'll be no need to send for me."

"I know, doctor," she replied timidly, "but . . . what can I do to prevent it?"

The doctor retorted, "You want to have your cake and eat it too, do you? . . . Tell Jake to sleep on the roof." Sanger would be forever haunted by the look of desolation on Mrs. Sachs' face, and by what happened afterward.

The telephone rang one evening three months later, and Jack Sachs' agitated voice begged me to come at once; his wife was sick again and from the same cause . . . Mrs. Sachs was in a coma and died within ten minutes. I folded her still hands across her breast, remembering how they had pleaded with me, begging so humbly for the knowledge which was her right . . . Jake was sobbing, running his hands through his hair and pulling it out like an insane person. Over and over again he wailed, "My God! My God!"¹¹

Sanger made her decision: "It was the dawn of a new day in my life . . . I knew I could not go back merely to keeping people alive . . ."¹¹

The Secret of the Rich?

Sanger already knew that millions of women needed the help for which Sadie Sachs had pleaded. Many of her calls for help had come from the Lower East Side, from women worn out by age 30 and obsessed by the need to avoid having more children. When she tried to explain the birth control methods on which the middle class relied—the condom and withdrawal—the women felt their men would never submit to either. And anyway, they wanted protection they could use themselves.

Poor women, Sanger found, suspected that rich women kept birth control a secret. It seemed to them that the poor were kept in sexual servitude in order to maintain a glut of workers, and thus the poorest pay and conditions.

The lives of the poor were desperate indeed. The work week was 60 hours. Women and children were routinely forced into the job market to feed ever-growing families. Conditions were so bad that, for example, in the Lawrence, Massachusetts, textile mills, 36 per cent of all men and women workers died by the time they were 25. For the children, survival—not success—was the immediate need. Government surveys showed that the lower a father's earning power, the more likelihood there was for his children to die; and the probability of infant death increased with family size.⁷

Comstockery

The main obstacle to public information about family planning was one man: Anthony Comstock. "Comstockery" was a type of thinking about sexuality and way of using the law that held sway in the United States for the 63 years between 1873 and 1936. Sanger would demolish Comstockery.

Anthony Comstock, self-appointed arbiter of morality and an extreme prude, lobbied through Congress a law banning pornography from the mails and common carriers. He slipped in a rider which specifically included information and devices for the prevention of conception, characterized as "obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, indecent and disgusting."⁹ Punishment was a heavy fine and one to ten years in jail. Comstock got himself named Special Agent for the U.S. Post Office, with power to make arrests and confiscate material. In place of a salary, he arranged to keep a substantial portion of the fines he imposed.

Comstock would boast that he had convicted 3,760 people, destroyed 160 tons of obscene material, and driven 15 people to suicide.¹² For example, one unfortunate doctor was imprisoned for six years for answering a pathetic plea for contraceptive advice which was actually a decoy letter sent by Comstock. Comstock also arrested shop owners who left unclothed mannequins in their windows prior to redressing them. Comstock was convinced that erotic postcards were the cause of crime and depravity. He relegated sex to the gutter, and there, ironically, it flourished in the form of brothels and white slavery.

Comstock-inspired sections of the New York State Penal Code went further, making it a crime for anyone to give birth control information for any reason. The law allowed one exception: doctors could give contraceptive information verbally if it was for the "prevention or cure of disease." Lawyers and doctors advised Sanger that this exception referred only to advice for males on the use of the condom to prevent venereal disease. A blatant example of the double standard, the law clearly facilitated male promiscuity.

George Bernard Shaw, who called birth control "the most revolutionary idea of the century,"¹³ quipped that "Comstockery is the world's standing joke at the expense of the United States."¹⁴ Comstock, who had never heard of Shaw, called him a smut dealer and tried to suppress his plays.

The Search for Help

Sanger found doctors of no help. Most, she suspected, knew little more about contraception than she knew herself.

And it was illegal for them to discuss what they did know. Many doctors, she found, rationalized their avoidance of the issue, feeling that the poor enjoyed breeding, "the poor man's luxury," and would not use contraceptives anyway.

Next she sought at least moral support from two groups that should have been sympathetic: feminists and labor leaders. But birth control was apparently too radical for the radicals of the day. Suffragists said, "Wait 'till we obtain the vote," and labor leaders said, "Wait 'till we unionize all workers." Sanger disagreed vehemently with these priorities. How could women like Sadie Sachs make use of the vote? And, she argued, "It was both absurd and futile to struggle [with an employer] over pennies when fast-coming babies required dollars to feed them."¹⁵

Sanger could not wait; women were dying. It is estimated that at this time there were two million illegal abortions annually in the U.S., many fatal. Also 25,000 women were dying in childbirth, many simply succumbing to their debilitated physical condition.¹⁶ Other pregnant women ended their constant crises with suicide. Sanger's goal was not just to preserve, but to protect and enhance these lives. She found herself alone.

Next she went abroad for help. Her husband had long wanted to study art in Europe, and she could investigate what was taking place in France, where the birthrate had been declining for three generations. She found birth control openly practiced there. The French farmer did not like to subdivide his land among too many heirs; it was his wife's duty to regulate the number of children. The chemical concoctions they used—solutions, suppositories, and tampons—were passed on from mother to daughter, a family's prized recipe. Sanger returned to the United States with her children in 1914, after only one month abroad, eager to publish what she had learned.

The Woman Rebel

Sanger began a monthly newspaper, *The Woman Rebel*. It urged women to rebel against all forms of slavery, especially biological. Its eight issues covered such topics as hygiene, child labor, the results of having too many babies, and the stupidity of the Comstock law. Her refrain was that a woman must be "mistress of her own body" and that forced motherhood is the most complete denial of a woman's right to life and liberty. An avalanche of mail poured in from women pleading for the "how" and not just the "why" of birth control. Comstock judged her newspaper unmailable and soon brought against her the test case she sought.

Fugitive from Justice

She now made a difficult tactical decision. It was wartime, and she could expect little public attention for her forthcoming trial. She might be given a lengthy jail sentence even though she had printed no specific birth control information. And her readers were still without the information they needed. She hurriedly wrote up all the details she knew about the topic in a pamphlet called *Family Limitation*, the

first modern manual on family planning. She had money for printing only 100,000. Soon, however, 10 million copies would be in circulation, in 13 languages.

Having found temporary homes for her three small children, she fled to wartime England. From the Atlantic she cabled friends to mail the copies of *Family Limitation*, deliberately sending one to the hostile judge appointed for her trial. In England, Sanger met with British birth control pioneers. At the British Museum she studied everything she could find about birth control.

In the Netherlands, she visited the world's first birth control clinics, which functioned with Queen Wilhelmina's blessing. The Netherlands had the world's lowest maternal death rate, while the U.S. had the highest of any country keeping count. The Netherlands also had the lowest urban death rate for babies. Sanger credited the clinics with the low levels of prostitution, VD, and illegitimacy, and with the increasingly high educational attainments of Dutch children.¹⁷

From abroad she wrote to a heart-broken husband, ending their relationship of 12 years. She insisted that she needed complete freedom. They were divorced a few years later.

Ironically, William Sanger was to be the first martyr of his wife's cause. During his wife's exile, a man posing as an old friend came to Sanger's studio to plead for birth control information on account of his large family and his wife's poor health. Sanger gave him his personal and only copy of *Family Limitation*. The decoy returned later with his boss, Anthony Comstock. After refusing to disclose his wife's whereabouts, William Sanger was jailed for 30 days for circulating obscene material.

The People versus Margaret Sanger

The pamphlet and Margaret Sanger's year of exile achieved what Comstock most wanted to avoid—huge publicity about his censorship of family-planning information. The silence which had protected his work was loudly broken. Comstock fulminated that the author deserved five years at hard labor for every copy of the pamphlet. It soon became clear that the public felt otherwise.

Just prior to the trial, the Sangers' six-year-old daughter was stricken with pneumonia, 30 years too soon for antibiotics. In spite of Margaret's constant care, first at home and then at the hospital, her beloved Peggy died, leaving Margaret Sanger numb with grief. Her crusade had been partly for Peggy's future benefit.

The story of the young nurse-mother pursued as a criminal by the U.S. Government and now beset by tragedy scooped World War I for headlines. Ready or not, Sanger was a celebrity, and New York's social register hurried to her side. The public rallied, too. Ninety-seven per cent of them, in a *Pictorial Review* poll, favored the availability of birth control.¹⁸

Clarence Darrow was one of many eminent lawyers who offered to donate their services. Sanger refused their offers and also their advice to plead guilty in order to get a lighter sentence. Appearing in her own defense, she made an un-



Margaret Sanger in 1917 greets the crowd outside the New York Court of Appeals, where she had the law broadened to include the protection of women's health through birth control.

*"I wanted the world made safe for babies."*²⁰

likely criminal: a frail-looking, strikingly beautiful woman, with hazel eyes and auburn hair, and a voice that was soft and nervous.

The court was packed with rich and poor alike and attended by the nation's top reporters. The judge adjourned the session. Crowds inside and outside cheered for Sanger. After other such scenes and postponements, the government finally dropped the case in 1916, commenting, "We were determined that Mrs. Sanger shouldn't be a martyr if we could help it."¹³ The *New York Sun* remarked that "the Sanger case presents the anomaly of a prosecutor loathe to prosecute and a defendant anxious to be tried."¹⁹ Sanger could not feel victorious; she knew that family planning information must be everyone's right and not her own special privilege.

Her next undertaking was a nationwide lecture tour, to take the issue to the people and to organize affiliates for her Birth Control League (today's Planned Parenthood). Lec-

ture fees and royalties from her many books and pamphlets provided what little income she had. During the early years of her work she never knew a moment's financial security. She kept her expenses minimal, living in an unheated, cold-water flat in a decrepit building on West 14th Street. But there were dental and boarding school expenses for the children, besides money for printing, postage, and travel.

The First Clinic

In the Brownsville section of Brooklyn in 1916—at 46 Amboy Street—Sanger opened the first U.S. birth control clinic. It was the first anywhere outside the Netherlands. Some contraceptive methods needed medical supervision, and all methods needed a source of supply. She was unable to find a doctor willing to risk the Comstock law or the opprobrium of the medical profession. So she and her sister, Mrs. Ethel Byrne, also a nurse, staffed the clinic.

She rented a storefront and went from door to door distributing handbills. By 7 a.m. on opening day, there was a long waiting line in the street. The press picked up the story, with the result that women came from New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Massachusetts.

Margaret Sanger and Ethel Byrne gave talks to small groups of women, gave simple instructions for using the methods, fitted some women with diaphragms, and answered personal questions. Each registrant told a pitiful tale. The clinic compiled some of the first vital statistics about women and pregnancy. These statistics would compellingly substantiate Sanger's case in later trials.

Of course, the clinic was illegal. Ten days after it opened it was raided by the New York City Vice Squad. Guarding the door, the police took the names and addresses of the now frantic women in the waiting room and confiscated the clinic's intimate case records. Sanger was arrested and spent the night in a rat-infested cell. The next day she put up bail and reopened the clinic. The police returned her to jail. Three charges were brought against Sanger and Byrne: selling an indecent pamphlet, running a public nuisance, and distributing birth control information. Sanger looked forward to the test case that the government had retreated from before.

Ethel Byrne's trial came first. She was found guilty and sentenced to 30 days in the workhouse. The incarcerated Byrne refused food and water, announcing that she would die for the cause. Her story competed for headlines with the World War I peace negotiations. After 185 hours of fasting, she was ordered force fed—a first in American penal history. On word that Byrne had been unconscious for 24 hours and was spitting blood, Sanger obtained permission from the Governor to see her, and the promise of his pardon for her sister if Byrne would promise to abide by the law. Sanger had little choice but to pledge that her sister would do so. It was two weeks before it was certain that Byrne would live. "It will be hard," speculated the outraged *New York Tribune*, "to make the youth of 1967 believe that in 1917 a woman was imprisoned for doing what Mrs. Byrne did."²¹

In January 1917, Sanger faced her own (second) trial. When she refused to abide by the law in future, she too was



Storefront exterior of Sanger's Brownsville birth control clinic, which was opened in 1916 in an overcrowded immigrant section of Brooklyn, New York.

*"I knew something must be done to rescue those women who were voiceless; someone had to express with white hot intensity the conviction that they must be empowered to decide for themselves when they should fulfill the supreme function of motherhood."*²³

sentenced to 30 days in the workhouse, a lighter sentence than she had expected. The workhouse apparently rejected a second Higgins sister, and Margaret spent the month in jail. Crowds inside and outside welcomed her release by singing the Marseillaise.

The Crane Decision

Ultimately the Brownsville-clinic trial resulted in a significant legal victory. In 1918, Judge Crane of the New York Court of Appeals provided what Sanger had long sought, an interpretation that applied the words "prevention or cure of disease" to women and pregnancy where it had only covered men and venereal disease. Doctors could now give advice to any woman provided they found even the slightest evidence of a health reason.

Sanger's next objective was to see doctors making use of the right she had just won for them and their patients. Shortly before her trial, the New York County Medical Society had voted three to one against birth control. A survey of all 29 metropolitan hospitals disclosed that two women, one with tuberculosis and one with a kidney ailment, had

been refused birth control help at every hospital, even though another pregnancy could prove fatal.²³

Another Clinic, Another Raid

Sanger responded in two ways, since organized medicine would do nothing. First, she hired a doctor to travel the country teaching contraception to interested physicians. In this way, she compiled the names of 20,000 local physicians to whom she could refer the thousands of women who wrote to her. It has been estimated that Margaret Sanger received one of the greatest amounts of mail ever received by a private citizen.²⁴ One letter was addressed simply: Saint Margaret, New York.

And secondly, in 1923, she opened her own doctor-staffed birth control clinic. Dr. Hannah Stone, who directed this new Clinical Research Bureau (now the Margaret Sanger Center), served without pay because there were not enough funds. Dr. Stone made the clinic her life's work, and her competent care and eloquent statistics helped reverse the medical profession's attitude.

Dr. Stone noted that her patients were 38 per cent Protestant, 32 per cent Jewish, and 26 per cent Catholic, closely mirroring the composition of the neighborhood.²⁶ Moreover, of a sample of 1,655 patients, 1,434 had aborted themselves regularly; one woman had done this 40 times.²⁶ Dr. Stone routinely took the risk of providing contraceptives at a woman's request, without a diagnosable "health reason." Other birth control clinics sprang up around the country.

In 1929, six years after the doctor-staffed clinic began, it was raided by the police. Shades of the Brownsville clinic! Again, the police tried to bully patients into giving their names and addresses, and again, medical records were carried off. Like other obstacles, the raid gave the movement huge amounts of free publicity. But more importantly, it brought forth the support of physicians, who saw in the confiscation of Dr. Stone's records a violation of the privacy of the doctor-patient relationship. Red-faced, the police dropped the matter as quickly as they could, and the clinic was soon back in operation.

In 1922, Sanger was freed from her constant financial crises when she married J. Noah Slee, millionaire president of the Three-in-One Oil Company. Slee made an unlikely husband for her: a devout church leader and arch conservative, 18 years her elder. Endlessly dazzled with Margaret, he agreed—in advance and in writing—to her personal and professional independence. With her long absences, hard work, and continuing love affairs, Sanger took the greatest possible advantage of this document. She was, Slee said, the great adventure of his life.

From the 1920s on, Slee supported her undertakings substantially. As demand for diaphragms rose sharply but none were manufactured in the U.S., Slee smuggled them in for his wife's clinic. He had them shipped from Germany to his Canadian factory and then taken through U.S. Customs in Three-in-One Oil boxes. He next provided start-up money for a U.S. diaphragm-manufacturing company.

Later Years

Sanger's many subsequent years of work for the movement saw continuing achievements and distintegrating opposition. In 1936, the last barrier set up by the Comstock law was demolished when, in another test case, Sanger established the right of doctors and other qualified professionals to use the mails and common carriers. The 63-year reign of Comstockery had come to an end. (Actually, contraceptives were not removed from U.S. obscenity statutes until 1971.)

Sanger lived a vigorous and highly unorthodox life before her death at age 86 in 1966. She saw her sons graduate from Cornell and Yale Universities and become physicians. She spent her last years in Tucson, Arizona, near one set of grandchildren.

Futurist H. G. Wells predicted that "when the history of our civilization is written, it will be a biological history and Margaret Sanger will be its heroine."²⁷ It is probably too early to assess the accuracy of his prediction. But we can at least observe that few radical reformers live to see the completed results of their work and to grow old basking in the world's tributes. Margaret Sanger, for one, did so.

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'People' Theme Chosen for AHA/CHA Joint Convention

Reflecting a renewed emphasis on human values in health care, "People Make It Possible" has been chosen as the theme of this year's joint convention of the American Hospital Association and the Canadian Hospital Association, scheduled for July 28-31, 1980, in Montreal. Planners for the international meeting are developing a four-day educational program based on the importance of human concerns in patient care.

The convention, to be headquartered at Place Bonaventure in Montreal, is expected to have an attendance of more than 15,000, including hospital people from Canada, the US, and Europe. During the week of the convention, the American College of Hospital Administrators and the Canadian College of Health Service Executives will also meet jointly in Montreal; a number of allied groups and professional societies have also announced plans to meet concurrently with AHA/CHA.

Exhibits are being prepared by approximately 400 companies dealing in products and/or services important to the health care industry.

For further information, contact: Nancy A. Wright, Department of Convention Services, American Hospital Association, 840 N. Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, IL 60611, 312/280-6323.