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the memory of Kenneth Hudson OBE,
and Georges Henri Riviere*

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Museum of Contraception and Abortion - the struggle for fertility control

MUSEUM OF CONTRACEPTION AND ABORTION (VIENNA,
AUSTRIA) - KENNETH HUDSON AWARD 2010

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11



Background

Limiting one's fertility to fulfil individual desires and aspirations is the second most important requirement for a happy life on this earth (apart from getting enough to eat). Or as Sigmund Freud said 100 years ago: "It would be one of the greatest triumphs of humanity ... if the act responsible for procreation could be raised to the level of a voluntary and intentional behaviour in order to separate it from the imperative to satisfy a natural urge."

Nature has planned an average of about 15 pregnancies in the 35 years of a woman's fertile years, resulting in 10 deliveries and 8 surviving children, with each breastfed for 2 years. Then if she was still alive, a woman entered menopause. Abundant and uncontrolled fertility drove people into a despair that is hardly conceivable these days. Throughout all of human history, people tried everything imaginable to reduce the natural course of fertility, but never had an effective means for doing so. Freud's vision of separating fertility and sexuality only became a reality a few decades ago. The introduction of the Pill and effective intrauterine devices (IUDs) in the early 1960s represented a turning point: for the first time in human history it became possible for children to be wanted and for sexuality to express love, happiness and intimacy.

The Museum of Contraception and Abortion documents this fascinating development. It documents the driving forces behind this remarkable change of life on earth towards self-determination in reproduction, the forces who opposed and still oppose the shift in fertility control, the social revolution that came with it and the technical advances that made all this possible. Self-determination in reproduction has been the main driver of unprecedented economic development over the

last century in what we call the developed part of the world.

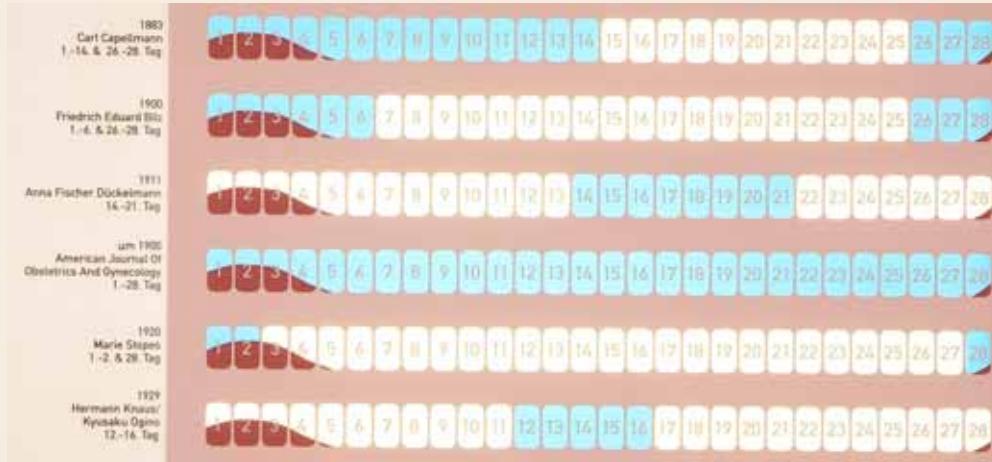
Why a museum of contraception and abortion?

Most people have some basic technical knowledge about contraception. Still, many unwanted pregnancies occur, leading to a high number of abortions worldwide. But there are significant differences between countries. For example, the abortion rate in the Netherlands and Switzerland is one third that of the US or Austria. Obviously, other aspects besides technical knowledge about contraception play an important role

This is what the Museum of Contraception and Abortion wants to achieve, especially for young people, so that they can make in-



ABORTION UNDER ILLEGAL AND LEGAL CIRCUMSTANCES - FROM THE KITCHEN TABLE TO A GYNAECOLOGICAL OPERATION ROOM
PHOTO ON THE LEFT PAGE: GEORG BEYER / PHOTO ON THIS PAGE: BRUNO KLOMFAR



formed decisions about the most intimate part of their lives. We achieve this by relating the struggle for fertility control of past generations – a pedagogic detour, so to speak. Instead of explaining the latest developments and most modern forms of contraception, we explain the thousands of frustrating and ineffective historical attempts that people tried in a desperate hope to reduce abundant fertility. Within this context, we also show the very few successful ideas that changed life on this planet. Young people learn on this journey what fertility means, how important prevention is and how an unwanted pregnancy can be avoided. A basic requirement for a satisfying life.

The Museum – the beginning

The idea for the museum came out of the clinic's work of counselling women and couples on contraception and unwanted pregnancies. There was no example to follow, no other collection we could copy or try to improve. At the beginning we had only the faint idea that teaching people about their fertility could be done with the help of a museum collection.

At first, most people could not imagine what

our initiative was about. We received many amused comments and even ridicule. People wanted to donate a collection of used condoms and similar "artefacts." Obviously, this topic is still so taboo that most people were unaware of their own need to obtain more reliable information and a basic understanding of their fertility.

It was quite difficult to get objects. Not because they were rare - contraception and abortion are very frequent events, worldwide - but because the topic is so taboo and people don't want to deal openly with it. It took 4 years of intensive global searching to bring together a collection of objects and publications that tell the story of fertility control. We also searched legal archives for cases of illegal abortion and infanticide, and even produced a short film on pregnancy testing with frogs - a widespread method in earlier times - because we could not find an existing film.

The Museum – telling the story of fertility control

Once we had enough objects and publications, we could actually start the museum, the more interesting part of the adventure. Two colleagues - Dr. Susanne Krejsa and

Barbara Sommerer - and myself met to put everything in context. Objects, publications, patent registrations, reports from inventors, pictures, films, advertisements, and most touching of all, personal stories of peoples' experiences. We tried to piece everything together so that all these artefacts would come alive again and tell the story of the past, the story of deep, deep despair caused by abundant fertility, the story of uncountable bizarre experiments on how to limit fertility, most of them ineffective or dangerous or both. But in the end, true success triumphed over centuries of unbearable suffering. The human mind discovered and developed effective means to limit natural fertility according to individual desires and aspirations.

Finally, after years of intense work, this truly unique museum opened in March 2007, inaugurated by the former Women's Minister Johanna Dohnal. It is located very centrally in Vienna. In addition to the exhibition rooms we have an extensive website that includes a virtual tour of the museum at www.muvs.org. The website also contains a huge database of the collection and professional photographs of every object, and an extensive library with hundreds of historic books that were scanned using text recognition software, allowing digital text searches. Finally, the site also contains many films and video clips on various aspects of the topic. The website is accessible to all users free of charge and provides a unique source of information on this most important aspect of life. We publish a regular newsletter free of charge in English and German, which can be ordered online at our website.

The museum is a member of the Austrian Museums Association (Museumsbund Österreich). We collaborate closely with different medical professionals and institutions as well as with medical history collections worldwide, and we enjoy a partnership with

the Dittrick Medical History Center and Museum in Cleveland, Ohio.

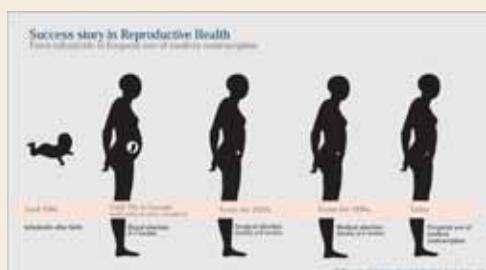
In 2009, the museum was awarded the Austrian Museums Seal of Quality, and in 2010 for the first time ever, it received the Kenneth Hudson Award from the European Museum Forum for its "outstanding success in communicating ideas and values to the public".

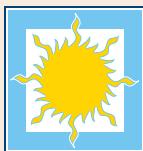
Since its opening the museum has seen an impressive increase in visitors. We currently do 20-30 guided tours for school classes per month and see many individual visitors and colleagues from various professional fields.

Conclusion

Our museum touches on the second most important aspect of life on this planet. After getting enough to eat, we need to be able to control our fertility. The museum tells the long and painful story of how humanity succeeded in this remarkable cultural achievement. No one will leave the Museum of Contraception and Abortion without learning something new, whether it be on medical progress or social developments. Everyone will have something to think about and discuss with others.

MUVS is still the only museum in the world exclusively dedicated to contraception, pregnancy testing and abortion.





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