

UC research examines eugenics past and present, driven by race, class, economics

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the science of improving the human population via selective breeding or reproduction – is not a concept confined to past centuries and decades, nor to locales outside the United States.

That's the finding of recent research by University of Cincinnati historian Wendy Kline, who will present a case study on the topic – a case study that examines the use of the controversial contraceptive injection, Depo-Provera, as a eugenic tool – on Nov. 11 at a conference titled "The Study of Eugenics: Past, Present and Future" to be held in Uppsala, Sweden. Her presentation is titled "Bodies of Evidence: Activists, Patients, and the FDA Regulation of Depo-Provera."

It's research that is particularly timely given that recent national news coverage has featured North Carolina's current plans to compensate surviving victims of forced sterilizations that took place there from the 1920s to the 1970s.

Kline's research into the debate surrounding Depo-Provera in the 1970s and 1980s began when she was visiting the Smith College Women's History Archive where she found a large box of materials still unprocessed and not yet catalogued. This was among 50 to 60 boxes from the National Women's Health Network.

She recalled, "The box contained hundreds of individual files, each detailing a woman's difficulties with the side effects of Depo-Provera or detailing how she had not been informed of those side effects or

detailing how she had been given the injection without her consent or by means of manipulation. This coercion, lack of informed consent and testing of the drug has obviously been gathered together in preparation for a class-action suit by the National Women's Health Network that had never gone forward."

But the collection did provide Kline with a rich source of material of examining the history of this contraceptive and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's public board of inquiry on Depo-Provera held in 1983.

"The use of Depo-Provera captures all of the controversy of this century regarding controlling fertility and who's ultimately making the decision about who gets to reproduce. My research looks at coercion, risks not fully understood and how arguments were made for and against Depo-Provera at the time," she explained.

For instance, it was in the Depo-Provera hearings in Washington that the manufacturer and those in favor of the drug had to first contend with the greater organizational powers and force of the feminist movement – but where that feminist movement had to argue its case by focusing narrowly on the flaws in the scientific research methodology applied when testing Depo-Provera.

In other words, those combating the use of Depo-Provera could not make a case against the drug based on morality or sentiment even though it could easily have been argued that this was a case of eugenics since the testing of the drug in the 1970s at Atlanta's Grady Memorial Hospital Family Planning Clinic involved mostly black women in public assistance.

Instead, because of FDA strictures related to evidence supplied at its board of inquiry hearings, opponents of the drug had to channel their arguments on the science then available on Depo-Provera.

"Of course," said Kline, "It was and is very difficult to separate science from the society that produced it. There was a reason, given the understood risks of Depo-Provera, that its testing was done on poor women in the U.S. and on women in developing countries."

Still, at the Depo-Provera hearings of 1983, those against the use of Depo-Provera were able to introduce the concept that the FDA's established cost/benefit analysis of a drug should include quality of life issues and that dismissing female patient's complaints about crippling [side effects](#) was not just "sexist," it was bad science.

Another outcome of the FDA 1983 inquiry into Depo-Provera and the publicity surrounding the hearings was the first national conference on black women's health held in Atlanta in 1983.

The larger message, according to Kline, is that eugenics is more than simply an embarrassing mistake of the past. The popular belief that technology and regulation of sexual fertility would lead to healthier, stronger, more self-reliant population carried over in the 1970s, '80s and even today.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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