

Clinica Para Madres (1934-1950)

The Clinica Para Madres (Mother's Clinic) opened in Tucson, Arizona, in December of 1934 as the first birth control clinic in Arizona. After moving to Tucson, birth control activist Margaret Sanger, along with a group of local philanthropic women, founded the clinic to provide Arizona women with contraception. During the early 1900s in the US, contraception was illegal under the federal Comstock Act. Additionally, many viewed contraception and sex as obscene and not to be discussed in public or outside of marriage. In 1950 the clinic affiliated with the national organization, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and it eventually became the Planned Parenthood of Southern Arizona. Clinica Para Madres, the first birth control clinic in Arizona, provided women with contraception despite birth control being illegal and socially stigmatized.

Margaret Sanger moved to Arizona in the early 1930s due to the respiratory health of her son, Stuart Sanger, and the perceived health benefits of living in Arizona's dry and hot climate. Prior to the move, Sanger had spent her life in New York City, New York, advancing the birth control movement and establishing the first birth control clinic in the nation in New York City. She was arrested for opening the clinic because it violated the Comstock Act, a federal law that banned the use and distribution of contraception and sex education materials. During the early 1900s, birth control was not only illegal, but also socially stigmatized. Many in the US argued that sex and contraception were obscene and should not be discussed.

After moving to Arizona, Sanger sought to expand the birth control movement in Arizona because of the state's high rates of infant mortality. In the early 1900s, Arizona had one of the highest infant mortality rates in the country. According to historian Mary Melcher, that high rate was primarily due to the rural conditions of Arizona, with towns and farms separated by large distances that were not easily traveled due to poor infrastructure and transportation. Additionally, Arizona lacked medical professionals trained in obstetrics and gynecology, and women in the state tended to give birth at home with assistance from friends or family members who weren't trained to assist with possible complications following birth.

In speeches to Arizona women, Sanger described how contraception was a solution to the problem of infant and child mortality rates in Arizona because contraception enabled women to limit their fertility. By limiting their fertility, Sanger said that women could have the number of children they felt they could physically, emotionally, and financially support. She also argued that if women had greater access to contraceptives, then they could also better control their fertility and would seek fewer abortions. Sanger sought to open a birth control clinic in Tucson in response to the high rates of infant mortality. However, distributing information about birth control was illegal under the Comstock Act, the federal law that banned the education, distribution, use of contraceptives and sex education materials.

To obtain the resources to open a clinic, Sanger enlisted the support of prominent local figures to help alleviate the stigma surrounding contraception and to gain a large support and client base. Additionally, Sanger needed financial support from philanthropists to start and sustain a clinic. Sanger sought out wealthy women with social and political prominence. With the help of Tucson philanthropist Barbara Dittman, Sanger organized a meeting of influential Tucson women in the fall of 1934 to discuss the birth control movement and her ideas for forming a clinic. The meeting was held in a Tucson home, with nearly sixty women in attendance. After the meeting, several women recorded as the wives of Sherman Wright, Hubert d'Autremont, Benson Bloom, Lawrence Gray, Guerin Wilson, George Dittman, J. Harold Bradley, G. Barrett, John Smith, and Roland Davidson, showed an interest in establishing a birth control clinic.

Clinica Para Madres, or Clinic for Mothers, was established on 19 December 1934. Despite offering birth control services and information that was illegal under the Comstock Act, Clinica Para Madres gained approval and support from the Pima County Medical Society in Tucson. Following the clinic's formation, the Pima County Medical Society called a special meeting on 4 December 1934 to pass a motion favoring the opening of a birth control clinic in Tucson. The motion passed, and the Pima Medical Society appointed the first Medical Advisory Board to the clinic.

In January of 1935, the clinic began offering its services to patients. The clinic opened with an initial budget of \$80 and a donated stock of 100 diaphragms and 20 tubes of spermicidal jelly, both types of contraception that are inserted into the vagina and prevent sperm from reaching the egg. The clinic was first located in a house leased from the Scottish Rite Cathedral Association in Tucson. The clinic had a volunteer board that oversaw the clinic and raised funds to support its work. One paid nurse staffed the clinic and also lived in the house. Sanger became the honorary chair of the clinic.

After opening, the clinic received no patients for three weeks. A volunteer for the clinic described the struggle to inform Tucson women of the birth control clinic's operation and services. The only method of outreach for the clinic was by word of mouth and by contacts established by the volunteers and clinic staff. Additionally, the type of patients who needed the clinic's services were often skeptical and timid to seek out or discuss contraceptive resources. However, over the course of 1935, twenty patients sought the clinic's services. The clinic began to gain clients, and in 1937, the clinic served sixty patients over the course of the year. Due to the demographics of Arizona, many of the clients were minority women.

The clinic relied on private donations, and it charged fees based on the patient's ability to pay. The fees were never more than one dollar, and many patients paid nothing. Clinic volunteers spent much of their time designing and implementing fundraising activities and making contacts with wealthy philanthropists in the Tucson area.

In 1936 the US Court of Appeals in New York, New York, overturned the federal Comstock Act and legalized birth control in its decision *United States v. One Package of Japanese Pessaries* (1936). That decision allowed the clinic to operate legally. However, while the decision legalized birth control at the federal level, many states throughout the US retained their individual Comstock Laws, which made accessing birth control difficult or illegal and violated the Supreme Court decision. In 1965 the US Supreme Court decision *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) repealed all state Comstock Laws.

In addition to providing women with contraception, the clinic sought to educate women and families about family planning. Family planning was a movement throughout the 1900s that encouraged women to space their pregnancies and births. In 1939 the founders of the Clinica Para Madres published a brochure explaining what they called planned parenthood, or the act of planning and spacing the birth of children. They detailed the benefits of planned parenthood for the family, mother, child, and community. In addition, they sought to focus their education efforts on contraception for child spacing rather than on sex education in order to diminish their association with claims that widespread contraception contributed to premarital sex.

Clinica Para Madres faced much criticism. According to Melcher, much of the most hostile criticism came from the Catholic Church. Bishop Daniel Gercke, the Catholic leader of the diocese of Tucson, was in continual conflict with Sanger and the birth control movement in Tucson. Gercke wrote letters to all the priests of Tucson and stated that no Catholic women be allowed to participate or support the birth control movement. Like Sanger, he attended local meetings and events and shared his views against the birth control movement.

In 1950 Clinica Para Madres affiliated with the national organization Planned Parenthood Federation of America (PPFA). PPFA was a national organization that formed in 1942 after the merging of the Birth Control Research Bureau in New York City, New York, which studied the effectiveness of different birth control methods, and the American Birth Control League, also in New York City, which advocated for contraception. Following association of Clinica Para Madres and PPFA, the clinic changed its name to Planned Parenthood Center of Tucson. The clinic later moved into a larger space, expanded its services, and maintained a large patient base. After expanding to several

clinic locations across southern Arizona, the organization changed its name to the Planned Parenthood of Southern Arizona. Many consider Clinica Para Madres the founder of Planned Parenthood of Southern Arizona that, into the twenty-first century, remained active.

Sources

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