

Harvey Leroy Karman (1924–2008)

Harvey Karman was an abortionist, inventor, and activist for safe abortion techniques in the US during the twentieth century. Karman developed the Karman cannula, a flexible soft tube used for vacuum aspiration abortions. Karman traveled extensively throughout the US to educate healthcare providers on how to administer safe abortions. He also traveled to Bangladesh, India, China, and other developing nations to promote safe and simple abortion techniques that anyone could perform without previous medical training. As of 2017, Karman's abortion technique and cannula continue to be widely used throughout the world for terminating early pregnancies. Karman challenged laws prohibiting abortion in the US prior to 1973 and worked to create methods for abortion that were safer, less expensive, and easier to administer than previous abortion techniques.

Karman was born on 26 April 1924 in Clatskanie, Oregon, as Harvey Walters. After his father abandoned him at a young age, Karman took his surname from one of his several step fathers, William Karman. Karman's mother relocated many times and often left him in various orphanages. Karman stopped attending school when he was fourteen years old and later joined the US Air Force. During World War II, Karman was stationed in Norfolk, England.

After his military service, he attended the University of California, Los Angeles, or UCLA, in Los Angeles, California, under the GI Bill, which provided education benefits to military veterans. At UCLA, Karman obtained a bachelor's degree in theater and a master's degree in psychology. While studying psychology at UCLA, Karman researched the emotional effects of therapeutic abortions, abortions which are performed when the pregnant woman's life is endangered. In the 1950s, abortion was illegal in the United States and in many European countries.

In the 1950s, while Karman was a student at UCLA, a fellow student facing an unwanted pregnancy committed suicide, and another young woman died from complications of a botched abortion. Following those deaths, Karman began assisting women who had become pregnant in finding illegal abortion providers in Tijuana, Mexico, where abortion was legal. Some of the women he assisted incurred financial exploitation, sexual assault, or even death during their time in Mexico. According to historian Elaine Woo, after witnessing the poor health standards and high prices of abortions in Mexico, Karman began learning how to perform abortions.

During the 1950s, illegal abortions were often performed by untrained individuals in unsanitary conditions. Receiving an illegal abortion from an untrained provider was usually unsafe and very expensive. The abortions were not performed in hospitals or medical facilities and the standard of care was not that of a licensed medical professional. Many providers used techniques that were not approved by the licensed medical community and often led to dangerous infections that could be fatal. According to historian Malcom Potts, Karman wanted to design a painless procedure with a short recovery time that would allow women to walk away without anyone knowing they had just undergone an abortion.

Throughout the mid-twentieth century, Karman referred women with unwanted pregnancies to abortionists while training himself in abortion techniques. In 1955 Karman, who at that time was a psychology doctoral student at UCLA, performed an illegal abortion on a pregnant woman in a motel room. The woman later died of complications from the abortion. Karman was subsequently charged with performing an illegal abortion and served two and a half years in prison.

Following his release from prison, Karman continued to advocate for abortion legalization. In the early 1970s, while abortion was still illegal in the US, Karman developed a device which used suction to remove menstrual tissue from the uterus, effectively shortening a woman's menstrual period. The

tool could also be used for early abortions during the first three months of pregnancy to remove the developing embryo and other contents of the uterus. Karman made the device, known as the Karman cannula, from plastic syringes and thin, flexible, plastic. According to Potts, the apparatus is one of the first manual vacuum aspiration devices for abortions.

Karman's technique and Karman cannula influenced the way abortions were performed during the mid 1900s. Menstrual extraction devices, like the Karman cannula, could be used for abortions on a woman who was awake because it caused little discomfort. Karman's procedure took only minutes to perform and was nearly painless. The tube also reduced healthcare costs for treating uterine bleeding since it was inexpensive and easy to sterilize. Karman did not seek a patent on his invention and did not make a profit from it.

Karman advertised the tool to healthcare providers as a flexible tubing apparatus used to perform relatively safer abortions than those which non-medical providers administered. Throughout the twentieth century, Karman educated many doctors, paramedics, and other healthcare providers on his technique. He partnered with the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers, a California-based women's healthcare center that educated health providers on how to administer safe abortions. Karman also began performing the abortion procedures himself, despite having no medical training.

In 1972, Karman traveled to Bangladesh as a part of a humanitarian mission with the International Planned Parenthood Federation. The Bangladesh government had invited the team to perform abortions on rape victims following the 1971 Indo-Pakistan War and train native physicians on manual vacuum aspiration abortion techniques. During the trip, Karman terminated many pregnancies of women who had become pregnant after being raped by Pakistani soldiers. Many of the women he treated were between the ages of ten and sixteen years old. In Bangladesh, Karman also taught local doctors and paramedics how to perform manual vacuum aspiration abortions using the Karman cannula.

In the early 1970s, Karman invented the super coil, a device intended to terminate second trimester pregnancies. At that time, abortion was still illegal, and most illegal abortions were only performed during the first trimester, because a safe option for second or third trimester abortions did not exist. The plastic super coils were inserted into the uterus. They were designed to expand when exposed to the moist environment in the uterus. The super coils would then be left in the uterus and would irritate the uterus causing a miscarriage.

Following his invention of the super coils, Karman was involved in a public scandal when he performed second trimester abortions on behalf of the Jane Collective of Chicago in Chicago, Illinois. The Jane Collective was a successful group of abortionists forming an abortion business that was highly monitored by police officials because abortions were still illegal in the US. After a police raid of the Jane Collective resulted in the arrest of many of the local abortionists in Chicago, the organization arranged for Karman to try his super coils on the remaining scheduled patients at an illegal abortion facility in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The Jane Collective chartered busses for the patients and relocated them from Chicago to Pennsylvania to obtain their desired abortions. According to Potts, Karman allegedly contacted a film crew from a New York television station to document the event. Many protesters who did not agree with Karman's methods surrounded the building. According to the attorney general of Pennsylvania at the time, abortionists were openly breaking the law to get arrested and then challenge the laws in court.

On 13 and 14 May in Philadelphia, Karman placed supercoils into fifteen female patients. Thirteen of the fifteen pregnant patients were subsequently hospitalized for medical complications resulting from the abortion. The Centers for Disease Control or CDC, later known as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, investigated the situation and found that at least three women had severe complications from the device, including infection, uterine perforation, and hemorrhaging. A statement from the CDC asserted that until the device was proven to be safe, it should not be used.

Following the legalization of abortion in 1973, Karman continued to travel to Asia through the 1980s to promote his technology and educate doctors and untrained people on methods for simple and safe abortions. In 1992, Karman retired to Santa Barbara, California where he died from a stroke

on 6 May 2008. Abortion providers such as Planned Parenthood continue to use similar techniques for some abortions as were made popular by Karman and his tube device.

Sources

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