

Harry Clay Sharp (1870-1940)

Harry Clay Sharp was a surgeon who performed one of the first recorded vasectomies with the purpose of sterilizing a patient. Sterilization is the practice that makes a person unable to reproduce, and vasectomy accomplishes that by severing the vasa deferentia, the sperm-carrying tubes in the male reproductive system. Historically, sterilization procedures have varied in techniques, goals, and risks, but Sharp's method of vasectomy allowed restriction of a patient's reproductive functions without significantly affecting other bodily functions. Historians have associated Sharp's use of the procedure, primarily on prison inmates, with eugenics, a movement with the goal of bettering humans via selective reproductive practices. With vasectomy, Sharp was able to sterilize people whom he did not deem fit to reproduce. Beyond simply pushing forward a new surgical method of sterilization, Sharp's political advocacy led to the use of his technique as a method of eugenicist control over human reproduction, especially in Indiana.

Sharp was born on 18 December 1870 in Charlestown, Indiana, to Margaret Sharp and James Sharp. He was the youngest of nine children, two of whom died in infancy. Sharp's education consisted of studies in medicine at Ohio State Medical School in Columbus, Ohio, and the University of Louisville in Louisville, Kentucky, and he received an MD degree from the University of Louisville in 1893. Two years later, Sharp began to work as a physician at the Indiana State Prison South, designated the Indiana Reformatory in Jeffersonville, Indiana, and later as the State Hospital Superintendent of Indiana. There he began his work with both male sterilization surgeries and eugenicist policy ideas.

Before Sharp's time, castration, the removal of the testes via surgery or halt of blood flow to the testes, was the most common way to sterilize males. The procedure became common in the US as a punishment for alleged sexual crimes committed by male slaves, typically against white women. Castration involved risks of bleeding, infection, and permanent hormone irregularities for the patients who underwent it. Though Sharp's surgical work differed in technique and effects on the body, he continued the practice of sterilization under punitive conditions.

The Indiana Reformatory housed convicted criminals and mental patients, many of whom exhibited sexual behaviors deemed dysfunctional in Sharp's reports. In his writings on the subject of sterilization, Sharp described a phenomenon of excessive masturbation and spermatorrhea, or excessive emission of semen without orgasm, among many of the male inmates. He claimed that these men were distressed by their compulsion to masturbate, resulting in distractions from their studies and day-to-day life, and that they approached him, as the Reformatory's physician, requesting treatment for their dysfunction. However, those reports came primarily from Sharp and were not substantiated by the prisoners, rendering it unclear whether his medical interest in performing surgeries on inmates was therapeutic or punitive.

On 11 October 1899, Sharp performed his first vasectomy on a nineteen-year-old inmate at the Reformatory. Sharp reported that the young man was upset by his compulsion to masturbate and requested that Sharp castrate him. Instead, Sharp convinced the inmate to undergo a vasectomy. The procedure involved severing the vas deferens rather than the full destruction of the testes. The method allowed Sharp to avoid the more severe medical complications of castration while rendering the inmate fully infertile. Sharp wrote that the inmate was doubtful about the success of the surgery for the first few days of his recovery but showed a near-complete alleviation of his compulsive masturbation within three weeks of the operation.

The first years of Sharp's vasectomies coincided with the passing of legislation promoting eugenics in his home state. In 1905, the Indiana legislature enacted a law banning marriage between people

with mental illnesses and other vaguely labeled diseases. Two years later, the state passed its first compulsory sterilization law. The 1907 law allowed for the forced sterilization of "confirmed criminals, idiots, imbeciles, and rapists," as labelled by physicians and penal institutions. The reported success of his procedure, along with its legal backing, allowed Sharp to promote vasectomies to a wider audience. Sharp reported increases in the mental acuity and happiness of his sterilized patients. Boasting the reported benefits along with his perception of vasectomy as a humane alternative relative to full castration, he cultivated the support of the National Prison Association and was elected the organization's president in 1907. As president, he lobbied for legislation on the state and federal levels that facilitated sterilizations for prison or reformatory inmates deemed socially unfit, such as the Indiana law from that same year.

However, the increased visibility exposed Sharp to greater public outcry against what many saw as simply a new form of castration. He left his position in the Indiana Reformatory after performing nearly 500 vasectomies on the inmates there, and another physician took his place by the end of 1908. Despite no longer working for the institution as a physician, Sharp remained on the Reformatory's board of trustees until 1913. The position allowed Sharp to continue influencing the prisoners' medical treatment. The same year, an inmate at the Indiana Reformatory named Eddie Millard, imprisoned for larceny, filed a complaint to the Indiana Governor's office, stating that Sharp forced him to have a vasectomy. Ultimately, his complaint did not spark significant change due to forced sterilization being legal under Indiana's 1907 law.

In 1910, Sharp wrote "The Indiana Plan," a call for increased compulsory sterilization nationwide, and presented it to his colleagues at the National Prison Association. Sharp argued for the already familiar idea of vasectomy as a more humane alternative to castration. He also emphasized the use of vasectomy as a medical therapy to both ameliorate the suffering of patients he considered suffered from sexual disorders and to prevent the transmission of heritable disabilities. Along with continuing his assurances of the safety and efficacy of vasectomy as a surgical procedure, "The Indiana Plan" highlighted Sharp's eugenicist ideals about legislated reproductive exclusion of undesirable individuals.

Sharp's tenure as trustee of the Indiana Reformatory ended in 1913, at which point he had no more influence over medical care in that facility, specifically the sterilizations of the inmates. Sharp went on to serve in the US Army Medical Corps during World War I. After his military service, Sharp went into practicing surgery privately in the U.S. before working for the U.S. Public Health Service and then the Veterans' Bureau as a physician and hospital administrator. He married Lillian Marie Sharp in 1925, with whom he had a son named James Sharp.

Sharp's work as a physician and advocate of sterilization served to spread the use of vasectomy as a permanent male sterilization procedure. His extensive use of the surgical technique as well as his persistent support for its safety and efficacy allowed for vasectomy to grow into a common surgical procedure. In 1921, the Indiana Supreme Court ruled that the Indiana sterilization legislation, promoted by Sharp, and its use in prison environments was unconstitutional and labeled it cruel and unusual punishment as well as a denial of due process. In 1927, Indiana passed another sterilization law that stood for nearly fifty years, with the state legislature repealing the law in 1974. There were over 2,000 people involuntarily sterilized in Indiana during that time.

Additionally, what many clearly see as of 2022 as the dubious nature of the Indiana Reformatory inmates' consent to being surgically sterilized raised questions about the legitimacy of Sharp's work as a medical treatment. Modern historians, including Angela Gugliotta and Alexandra Minna Stern, have pointed to factors that make Sharp's claims of prisoner compliance less than credible. A carceral, or prison, environment like that of the Indiana Reformatory, holds inmates under the power of prison employees like physicians and administrators. In addition to the fact that Sharp's and other administrators' jobs were to control inmates, there existed opportunities to reward the vasectomy patients for their compliance in the surgeries. Possible rewards could have included shorter prison terms, better accommodations, or preferential treatment from prison officials. Furthermore, Sharp recorded the positive results himself. There are few extant primary accounts from the prisoners, other than Millard's account of forced sterilization.

Sharp worked for Veterans' Administration hospitals for the rest of his life. He moved from Mas-

sachusetts to Wisconsin while working for the Veterans' Administration before being named Chief Medical Officer of the Veterans' Administration facility in Lyons, New Jersey.

On 31 October 1940, Sharp died after a short illness at the age of sixty-nine.

Sources

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