

The Mothers' Clinic

The Mothers' Clinic for Constructive Birth Control was established on 17 March 1921. The first family planning clinic ever established in Great Britain, it was co-founded by Marie Charlotte Carmichael Stopes and her husband Humphrey Verdon Roe at Number 61, Marlborough Road in Holloway, North London. The Mothers' Clinic was one of the highlights of Stopes's extensive career as a proponent of available birth control and women's sexual equality. Although it suffered from slow business initially, the clinic eventually flourished and expanded to other locations, growing into today's not-for-profit organization Marie Stopes International. Prior to the early 1900s and the fight for controlled reproduction, couples had very little power over their own fertility. The establishment of this clinic and others of its kind was an important milestone in the history of managed fertility and reproduction.

Stopes and Roe originally met as a result of their common interest in making birth control more widely available and both were already entertaining ideas about opening a clinic when they first met. It took less than three years after their marriage to bring their shared plans to fruition. Historically, most of the credit for the clinic is given to Stopes, whose activism stemmed from her desire to increase family planning, therefore reducing the number of births to include only those children who were intentionally conceived. According to Stopes biographer June Rose, the original clinic had four purposes: help the poor, take the temperature of working class attitudes toward birth control, collect data on contraception, and broaden the scope of knowledge about women's sexuality. However, it is important to note that Stopes's interest in birth control was intertwined with her ardent support of eugenics and that she saw contraception as a means to achieving the goal of improving the human race.

The founders were careful to make very clear the distinction between birth control and abortion. The Clinic refused to perform or even consult with clients about abortions and all staff members were required to swear an oath never to perform one. Despite this concession to the predominant moral sensibilities of the time, much criticism was leveled at the Clinic. Some critics voiced concern because Stopes was a doctor of science, not of medicine. This concern was unfounded, as the Clinic had a separate medical staff and Stopes never performed any medical procedures. Although controversy often brings media attention, the Clinic's very controversial opening received relatively little press coverage, due largely to the fact that its presence was disapproved of by much of the media itself. The Times—one of the leading newspapers in Britain—was one of several publications that refused to print any information about the Clinic because it considered the topic of contraception inappropriate for a family newspaper. This was the most common media response to the Clinic's opening, and the few positive reviews it received were written by Stopes's supporters.

The Mothers' Clinic was established in a poor area of North London in order to ensure accessibility for women of all socioeconomic classes. The building itself was a small house, decorated inside with friendly blues and whites, with a vase of fresh flowers on the front desk and wallpaper showing smiling infants. The steady trickle of women came for free contraceptive advice, the first time such counseling was widely available to the lower classes. The only price paid by clients was for the contraceptives themselves, which were available at cost to most and provided free of charge in cases of extreme financial need. Although the Clinic was intended to be funded by donations, it was originally supported by the couple's personal funds—they paid for the house, renovations, staff, and maintenance. In accordance with Roe's original plans, only women worked there: nurses, including head midwife Nurse Maud Hebbes, and a consulting doctor, Dr. Jane Lorrimer Hawthorne, who visited a few times per week. The Clinic operated seven days per week and an average visit consisted of a brief set of questions about personal history followed by a vaginal exam that included

fitting for a pessary (rubber cervical cap) with instructions and a demonstration of its use.

Stopes was a champion of the Clinic, initiating widespread advertising efforts that included pamphlets and the organization of a public meeting on 1 May 1921 that was attended by prominent politicians, celebrities, and medical professionals of the day. Despite her best efforts, an average of about three clients a day climbed the front steps of No. 61 Marlborough Road in its first year of operation and only 518 women had visited the Clinic by the end of its first year. Yet despite the lack of a broad customer base in its inaugural year, the Clinic's clientele eventually grew. In 1925 the organization moved to a new location on Whitfield Street in Central London, where it remains today, renamed the Marie Stopes House. The Mothers' Clinic, from its humble beginnings in a small house in a shabby part of North London, ultimately grew into what is today the not-for-profit organization Marie Stopes International, which as of February 2008 operates in almost forty countries.

Although the Clinic served primarily women, it was one of the first valid options for couples (especially working class couples) seeking greater control over their reproduction. Its establishment was a landmark in the history of family planning. By establishing the first family planning clinic in the UK, Stopes and Roe continued the fight for sexual education and independence. The establishment of the Mothers' Clinic in 1921 was reflective of the larger social changes occurring at the time with regard to attitudes about sexuality and parenthood.

Sources

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3. Rose, June. *Marie Stopes and the Sexual Revolution*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992.