

Marie Stopes International

Marie Stopes International (MSI) is a not-for-profit organization based in the United Kingdom that promotes reproductive and sexual health. It grew from one small clinic, founded in North London in 1921, into an international provider of reproductive health care and information that operates in almost forty countries. The Mothers' Clinic, from which it grew, was created in the hopes of expanding couples' reproductive rights, and the modern organization continues to work toward the same goal today. For the better part of a century, MSI and the clinic from which it developed have been significant players in the battle for personal choice and control in the area of human reproduction.

In 1921 British social activist Marie Stopes and her husband Humphrey Verdon Roe founded the first family planning clinic ever established in the UK. The Mothers' Clinic offered free contraceptive advice and instruction and sold contraceptives at cost. It was aimed in large part at lower income citizens, and it was located in a poor area of North London in order to ensure accessibility for women of all socioeconomic classes. This legacy of equal access continues to be honored by the modern organization, as surplus funds from centers in the UK and Austria are distributed to programs in economically deprived areas of the world. In 1925 the clinic moved to a new location on Whitfield Street in Central London, where it is now known as the Marie Stopes House and serves as the flagship clinic for Marie Stopes International.

The modern organization was founded in 1976 by Dr. Tim Black, Commander of the British Empire, and his wife Jean. Dr. Black took control of the Mothers' Clinic and within a few years turned what had been a single, suffering clinic into a successful enterprise that soon spread to several more locations across the country and finally abroad. Dr. Black continued to serve as CEO of MSI through 2007, and as of 2008 sits on the Board of Trustees.

Stopes's legacy of placing reproductive control in the hands of couples has been maintained and is reflected in the goal and mission of the modern organization. However, some evolution of the original philosophy has occurred. While Stopes and her Mothers' Clinic staff wanted no association with abortion and refused to perform any, today the global organization they spawned performs thousands of abortions each year. MSI is in fact the second largest provider of abortions in the UK and, according to globalhealth.org, the largest private provider of abortion services in the world.

The overarching purpose of the original clinic was to prevent unplanned pregnancies and resulting children, which is still the stated purpose of MSI today, though its methodology has changed. According to the organization's website, its services include abortion, female sterilization, vasectomy, health screening, post-abortion care, maternal and child health services, STI (sexually transmitted infection) diagnosis and treatment, and HIV prevention initiatives such as condom distribution and male circumcision. MSI also sponsors frequent campaigns fostering public awareness and promoting behavioral changes, especially in relation to HIV.

This international organization is based in the UK but operates in thirty-seven other countries as well, offering services through both fixed-location and mobile means. MSI also sponsors numerous global public health initiatives and organized the 2007 Global Safe Abortion Conference in London. The nonprofit has seen some of the controversy that inevitably follows from abortion and reproductive rights work: in 2003 the United States government under the Bush administration cut funding to the group on the grounds that it supported coerced abortions and involuntary sterilization in China. Though MSI does indeed operate in China, providing contraception and abortion counseling and services, there remains no evidence that it was ever involved in the reproductive abuses allegedly performed there.

Although it has seen a moderate level of controversy, the organization and its worldwide efforts are generally held to be necessary and life saving. Marie Stopes International, by providing reproductive health care services and education, continues the work of the clinic from which it grew. Its rich history has developed against a backdrop of ever-changing social values and policies in the area of human reproduction, and its quest to expand reproductive rights and grant individuals control over their own fertility and reproduction continues.

Sources

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