

A Look Back

The Rest of the Month

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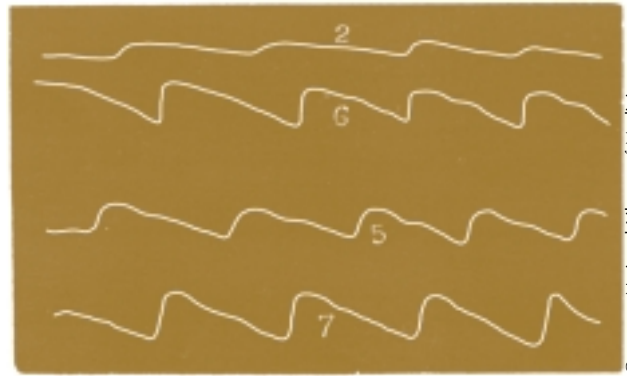
In 1874, a question for the annual Boylston Prize essay competition at Harvard Medical School was “Do women require mental and bodily rest during menstruation and to what extent?” Menstruation was a hot topic. In the previous year, Dr. Edward Clarke, a member of Harvard’s Board of Overseers, had published a book called *Sex in Education; or, A Fair Chance for the Girls*.

Clarke argued that young women could not withstand the rigors of higher education. He described the female reproductive system as a “delicate and extensive mechanism” that could not develop properly while a girl was studying. Like many other physicians of his time, Clarke saw a strong link between the reproductive and nervous systems, and he claimed that mental activity sapped nervous force from the developing uterus and ovaries. In Clarke’s book, case histories were used to paint a dire picture of the consequences of female education: leukorrhea, amenorrhea, dysmenorrhea, inflammation of the ovaries, hysteria, and uterine prolapse.

Clarke’s terrifying warnings echoed in the new colleges and medical schools for women that were being founded all over the United States, as well as in new co-educational institutions. Regarding that time, M. Carey Thomas, the president of Bryn Mawr College, said years later, “We did not know when we began whether women’s health could stand the strain of education. We were haunted, in those days, by the clanging chains of that gloomy little specter, Dr. Edward H. Clarke’s *Sex in Education*.”

Within the year, four books debating Clarke’s thesis were published. Clarke had proposed vague special arrangements that would permit women to be excused from studying during menstruation. One critic wondered if Clarke would be willing to extend his arguments to housewives: Could women take to their beds every month, refusing to cook, clean, or care for children?

The scientific refutation of many of Clarke’s claims



Courtesy: National Library of Medicine

came in the essay that won the Boylston Prize. The essays were judged anonymously, and—in a delightful irony—the competition was won by a woman. Dr. Mary Putnam Jacobi was among the best-educated physicians, male or female, of her day; she had earned a degree with high honors from the Paris Ecole de Médecine. Jacobi sent out 1,000 questionnaires to women about their menstrual and health histories; she extensively analyzed the 286 replies. Of the women who responded, 54% experienced no menstrual difficulties at all. Jacobi suggested that exercise and good nutrition were probably better than bed rest for most women who experienced minor menstrual difficulties. She argued that severe difficulties were usually due to some anatomic abnormality rather than to any acquired cause.

Jacobi augmented her statistical findings with a variety of studies she carried out at the New York Infirmary for Women and Children, where she was on staff. She assessed women’s muscle strength using dynamometers. She measured nutrition levels by calculating urinary urea levels. And she used an early model of the sphygmograph to measure pressure in the radial artery, arguing that increased pressure was due to increased blood volume (see the tracing reproduced above). Instead of interpreting menstruation as a depletion of vital forces that required special care, Jacobi understood it as a return to normal levels after a surge in nutrition—a healthy process that did not require rest or respite from mental activity.

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