

A LINE ON LIFE

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The First Sex Survey *

In 1948 and 1953 respectively, Alfred Kinsey came out with his shocking books – *Sexual Behavior of the Human Male* and *Sexual Behavior of the Human Female*. However, his surveys for his books were not the first to be done in the area of sexual behavior.

To find what might have been the first sex survey, we have to go back to the late 1800s – during the height of the Victorian era. Due to the standards of Queen Victoria, any communication about sexuality was suppressed. Women were assumed to have no sexual desires.

In fact, Queen Victoria started a whole new vocabulary to disguise anything that might hint at sexuality. For example, the terms, "*legs*," seemed vulgar, because sexual organs are between the legs. Instead, they were called "*limbs*," because limbs – like those on trees – have no sexual organs between them. In fact, many types of "*limbs*" were covered over with ruffled skirts – table limbs, piano limbs and so on. (Your bed ruffles – that cover the limbs of your bed – might be leftovers from this Victorian compulsion.)

The standards of Queen Victoria were adopted in the United States, and they led to a stifling of any sexual information. Until just recently, topics like pregnancy, menstruation and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) have been taboo topics – especially in the media. Victorian values were the major reason why Kinsey's publications were considered so shocking. Many parents – influenced by Victorian norms – are still extremely uncomfortable about discussing sexuality with their children. Some individuals are even too uncomfortable to discuss sexuality with their spouse.

At the height of the Victorian era, a remarkable woman emerged – Dr. Clelia Mosher. She was born in Albany, New York, in 1863. She started college at Wellesley and continued at Stanford. For her Master's thesis at Stanford, she debunked a myth of that time. It was thought that women could only breathe high in the chest, while men breathed deeper with the diaphragm. Mosher found that this difference was caused by women being laced into tight-fitting corsets! When she was 36 years old, Mosher finished medical school at Johns Hopkins.

Over a period of 30 years, Mosher surveyed Victorian women about their sexual lives. Most of these women were born about the time of the Civil War. Her nine-page survey was administered to a total of 47 women. Of course, the sample is small and not representative of most Victorian women. Many were faculty wives at universities or patients from Mosher's medical practice. Just the fact that they responded to her survey makes them a select group. They were also extremely educated for that era – 81% had attended college. Even though this is a biased sample, it is remarkable, because it is the only known survey of Victorian women – in a period when women were not even supposed to be sexual. Here are some of Mosher's findings:

- Even though Victorian women were not supposed to feel sexual desires, 35 of the 47 women indicated that they desired sexual intercourse.
- Thirty-four of the women said they had orgasms.
- As suspected by Mosher, women claimed that their longer time to obtain orgasm was a cause of marital conflict. One woman said that her sex life had been unpleasant for years. It was because of her "*slow reaction*," but "*orgasm (occurs) if time is taken*." Another woman complained that "*Men have not been properly trained*." Some of these women indicated that not having orgasm was psychologically devastating. (It seems that some things have not changed that much in the last century.)

- Over two-thirds of the women used some form of birth control. Most used douching, followed by withdrawal and "*timing*." (These methods are not considered reliable now.) However, some husbands used a "*male sheath*" (a condom), and two women used a "*rubber cap over the uterus*" (either a diaphragm or cervical cap). One woman said she used "*cocoa butter*," but she did not explain why or how.

Dr. Mosher's survey is an eye-opener for the era in which it was done. Even with the sexually repressive teachings of Queen Victoria, some women still enjoyed sex – and these women were the elite of their sex rather than being at the more disreputable end of the continuum.

Even so, some of these women were affected by Victorian values. In fact, three women indicated that their ideal would be to never have sex at all. However, most of the women still expressed their sexual desires and experienced orgasms. To add to this, they seemed to enjoy sex with their husbands.

Some of you may want to throw off the shackles of Victorian norms to gain more information about your sexuality. If so, you can get a great deal out of the [Human Sexuality \(Psy/Soc 170\)](#) course taught at Arizona Western College. In contrast to Victorian norms, the course takes a straightforward approach to all aspects of sexuality and provides an atmosphere for honest, thought provoking discussion. The goals are not only to provide you with accurate information, but to also help you feel more comfortable about discussing sexual topics with your spouse and children.

* Adapted from Janet Shebley Hyde's *Understanding Human Sexuality*, McGraw-Hill, 1990, page 5.