

Planning Fertility:

The Embryonic Stages of Medicalization in Australia

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Controlling fertility with reproductive techniques and treatments has been a significant aspect of not only individual family life but also state policy. In particular, rapid development and widespread access to assisted reproductive technology (ART) in the past several decades have led to the public discussion on issues relating to access and regulation. In Australia, the State of Victoria became the first jurisdiction in the world to enact legislation to regulate ART research and practice.

The primary objective of this paper is to analyze the medicalization of (in)fertility in Australia. A body of historical research on the Australian family has developed since the 1970s, illustrating the process of family modernization and diversification. While covering developments in methods for preventing pregnancy, they have overlooked the advancement of (in)fertility treatments which eventually led to the recent ART developments. Through an analysis of political documents and other materials, this paper scrutinizes the initial stages of clinical (in)fertility treatment, focusing particularly on the establishment of sterility clinics in the 1930s-1940s and related political debates, and in so doing will describe the construction of the family through management of fertility in early to mid-20th century Australia.

Medical control of fertility has been promoted since the 1910s, “increasing professional dominance over reproductive activities” (Reiger 1991). The first sterility clinic was established in Sydney at the end of the 1930s, and during WWII, sterility was first addressed as a national problem in reaction to declining birth rates, leading to establishment of clinics in major cities. Problematization of sterility took place in the context of “anxiety” towards the nation’s future, specifically security and development concerns. Examination of this discourse clearly demonstrates that historical research on the family needs to include (in)fertility.

References

Reiger, Kerreen, 1991, *Family Economy*, Ringwood: McPhee Gribble.