



1953

(Tolerton, J., 2011)

## Family Planning

### The Sex Hygiene and Birth Regulation Society

The first meeting of what became New Zealand's first birth control group, the Sex Hygiene and Birth Regulation Society, took place in 1936, the impetus coming from Communist Party women who had set up the *Working Woman* newspaper.

#### Nothing to do with Stan

One woman remembered trying to find out about contraception in the 1930s: 'We had six [children] and we couldn't afford to look after any more, so I asked the doctor what we could do. "Oh, nothing you can do about *that*". That's what he told me. ... Talk about it with Stan [her husband]? We didn't talk those days; we just didn't talk about it. Stan's mother used to say: "Poor Stan, another baby," as if I was the one to blame. And no "Poor Vera".'<sup>1</sup>

Elsie Freeman (later Elsie Locke) organised the first meeting, became the first secretary and wrote the first publicity pamphlet saying the organisation aimed 'to educate and enlighten the people of New Zealand on the need for birth control and sex education, and to promote the provision of facilities for scientific contraception so that married people may space or limit their families, and so mitigate the evils of ill-health and poverty'.<sup>2</sup> The group changed its name to the New Zealand Family Planning Association (NZFPA) in 1939.

### Opposition to birth control

The group's start was late compared with other Western countries, which had birth control organisations from the late 19th century – advocating contraception was largely unacceptable in New Zealand.

The society was initially supported by the Eugenics and Racial Improvement Society, but also faced a great deal of opposition, particularly from doctors. When association members Jean Dawson and Isobel Pope visited Wellington obstetricians and gynaecologists in the late 1930s, most opposed birth control. 'Sometimes we were hustled to the door as though we were sluts,' Dawson wrote.<sup>3</sup>

#### 'Bring the kids round!'

In the 1940s the Family Planning Association's Jean Dawson imported the book *Parenthood, design or accident*. A customs officer phoned to say the book's diagrams were unacceptable to some sections of the community. Then the police rang to say a detective would call on her. Jean invited committee members to a meeting at her house, telling them to bring their children. The detective found the women having morning tea surrounded by noisy toddlers and babies. He left saying, 'Can see



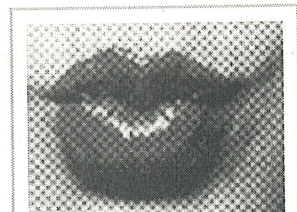
Elsie Locke



Family Planning conference, 1951

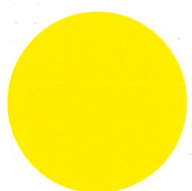


'Family planning means ...'



'Only when you're ready'

3rd



you aren't against people having children.<sup>4</sup>

## Police stop birth-control publicity

When the NZFPA sent out a circular to women subscribers of *Woman To-Day* magazine in 1940 to boost membership, it received a police summons for sending obscene literature through the mail. The Post Office said the letter was obscene as it contained the word 'contraception'.

The group decided not to advertise, hold public meetings, contact the press or send circular letters. It answered individual letters – 2,317 between 1941 and 1946 – usually advising women to get a cervical cap fitted by a doctor. In 1945 it had a list of 40 doctors for referrals.

## Family planning clinics

New Zealand's first family planning clinic finally opened above a mechanic's garage in Remuera, Auckland, in November 1953. The world's first clinic had been opened by the first Dutch woman physician, Dr Aletta Jacobs, in Amsterdam in 1882. Margaret Sanger had been jailed for opening the first US clinic in New York in 1915, and Dr Marie Stopes had opened Britain's first clinic in 1921.

The Auckland clinic was expensive; women paid two guineas (\$96 in 2010 terms) for two years' 'supervision', plus the cost of contraceptives. The second clinic opened in Christchurch in 1956, initially for just one afternoon a week, with Judy Lunn becoming the first New Zealand-trained family planning nurse. NZFPA became an associate member of the International Planned Parenthood Federation in 1955, and a full member in 1959.

## Doctors and health department disapproval

Just as NZFPA was gaining acceptance in the community, the New Zealand (British) Medical Association suspended formal recognition of the society in 1960, writing, 'We do not think that the private, personal and intimate purposes can be served as well by lay societies of more or less corporate organisation, requiring press publicity and subscriptions but not professional status.'<sup>5</sup> The Health Department agreed to fund some of the organisation's work in the late 1950s, but not its contraceptive work. The government finally started subsidising this in 1972.

## Adopting the pill

NZFPA started prescribing the pill to married women from 1964 and unmarried women from the early 1970s, bringing renewed disapproval from doctors. In 2007 the organisation changed its name to Family Planning.

In the 2000s, as well as supplying contraceptives and carrying out vasectomies, its services included cervical smears and tests for sexually transmissible infections as well as wide-ranging educational programmes, including for parents on how to tell their children about sex.

### Footnotes

1. Quoted in Coral Broadbent, Myra Kunowski and Suzanne Worrall, *Changing our lives: women's impact on New Zealand society: health, 1915–1985*. Auckland, Longman Paul, 1988, p. 46. Back
2. Quoted in Helen Smyth, *Rocking the cradle: contraception, sex and politics in New Zealand*. Wellington, Steele Roberts, 2000, p. 53. Back
3. Quoted in *Rocking the cradle*, p. 55. Back
4. Quoted in *Rocking the cradle*, p. 63. Back

## Biographies



Alice Mary Bush, 1914–1974



Sylvia Gytha de Lancey Chapman, 1896–1995



Miriam Bridella Soljak, 1879–1971



Sophia Lois Suckling, 1893–1990

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