

From the Archives:

Letter to the Editor

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There is no denying that digitized newspapers are a precious tool for researchers. Centuries-old news once forgotten is now available at any time. Keyword searches make finding relevant information easy—all without needing to leave home. The Delaware Academy of Medicine Archives is joining this digital revolution to share our rich collections with the world. However, for those willing to brave the dust and the occasional desiccated bug carcass, flipping through the physical copy of an old paper can lead to valuable and surprising discoveries. For example, by unpacking one letter to the editor tucked away in the stacks, the ugly history of Delaware's Title 16, Chapter 57 law was revealed.

On February 5, 1929, Wilmingtonian George A. Donahue wrote:

CHALLENGES LAW AND STATEMENTS ON STERILIZATION

Permit me space in your esteemed paper to say a few words in defense of the insane, feeble-minded, and epileptic. After reading the sterilization report in the *Every Evening* of the 4th instant, by former Lieut. Gov. J. Hall Anderson, as secretary of the State Board of Charities, in reference to that abominable, unchristian sterilization law, put upon the books of Delaware, the same, in my humble opinion is the blackest work it will ever receive from the hands of Christians and civilization, and the day will come by the grace of God, just as sure as dawn follows the night, when Delaware, with loud wailing and lamentation, will bow its head in shame to hide the infamy due to it.¹

Mr. Donahue continues to denounce the report and Anderson for three more paragraphs, ending with a call to loyal Christian soldiers and broad-minded citizens to combat legislation that put down the laws of God. It is difficult to gauge how many Delawareans shared Mr. Donahue's opinion. One thing is sure: public health officials, administrators, and legislators embraced the new "science" of eugenics and allowed it to determine the extent of civil liberties afforded the "genetically unfit."

Eugenics is the pseudo-scientific idea that humans can be improved or perfected by "breeding out" disease, disabilities, deviant social behavior, and other undesirable characteristics. Positive eugenics promotes the breeding of "superior hereditary stock." Many eugenicists believed that education campaigns would lead to voluntary public participation (Figure 1). Negative eugenics restricts or prevents reproduction for those deemed genetically "unfit" by discouraging or prohibiting marriage, restrictions on immigration, or through sexual segregation, sterilization, or euthanasia. For some religions, eugenics is akin to abortion and contraceptives, in that it is a sin against nature to interfere with human reproduction. The law Mr. Donahue refers to is an example of negative eugenics.

Figure 1. The American Eugenics Society, "The Triangle of Life," presented at the Kansas Free Fair. *American Philosophical Society*

UNFIT HUMAN TRAITS
SUCH AS FEEBLEMINDEDNESS
EPILEPSY, CRIMINALITY,
INSANITY, ALCOHOLISM,
PAUPERISM AND MANY OTHERS,
RUN IN FAMILIES AND ARE
INHERITED IN EXACTLY THE
SAME WAY AS COLOR IN
GUINEA-PIGS. IF **ALL**
MARRIAGES WERE EUGENIC
WE COULD **BREED OUT**
MOST OF THIS UNFITNESS
IN **THREE GENERATIONS.**

THE TRIANGLE OF LIFE

ENVIRONMENT HAVE
EDUCATION DO
WHAT YOU
ARE HERITAGE

YOU CAN IMPROVE YOUR EDUCATION,
AND EVEN CHANGE YOUR ENVIRONMENT;
BUT WHAT YOU REALLY **ARE** WAS ALL
SETTLED WHEN YOUR PARENTS WERE
BORN.
SELECTED PARENTS WILL HAVE
BETTER CHILDREN **THIS**
IS THE GREAT AIM OF EUGENICS

Earlier in 1929, representatives from the Delaware State Hospital at Farnhurst and the Delaware Hospital for the Mentally Retarded lobbied the state legislature to enlarge the scope of the 1923 law known as "*An act to provide for the sterilization of certain defectives.*" Under this law, inmates at mental institutions could be sterilized. The proposed 1929 amendments included criminals with mental abnormalities, the chronically insane, promiscuous women, and gay men.

Dr. Mesrop A. Tarumianz, Superintendent of Farnhurst, argued that the amendments were vital to the hospital's needs. The overcrowded conditions led to neglect and the lack of proper treatment. Additionally, these amendments would save the taxpayers money. According to Tarumianz, one Delaware family alone had cost taxpayers \$125,000 (\$2,005,190 today) over the last 35 years.² The cost savings argument was used successfully throughout the 1930s, thanks in part to the economic depression.

Lieutenant Governor Anderson clearly stated that the proposed amendments were about more than simply cost saving measures and concerns over treatment of wards of the state. His report to the State Board of Charities ends with the conclusion that:

"The great social menace, however, of the feeble-minded and insane cannot be computed in money. We cannot afford longer to sit idly by and permit the blood of our people to be longer contaminated by the rapid reproduction of mental defectives whose children will later, in ever increasing numbers, fill our jails with criminals and our hospitals and institutions with insane, feeble-minded and pauper dependents."³

On March 29, 1929, the amendments passed. Dr. Tarumianz informed the General Assembly that Farnhurst intended to sterilize 150 to 200 Delawareans each year until imbecile, insane, or feeble-minded children in the state were a thing of the past.⁴ In the 1930s, Delaware was the only state that outpaced California in per capita sterilizations with a rate ranging between about 80

and 100 sterilizations per 100,000 individuals.⁵ Though the law stated that the patient had to give consent, many were likely coerced.

Even though Nazi sterilization and extermination programs created a distaste for eugenics in America, many sterilization laws remained. In Delaware, sterilizations not only continued, but saw an uptick in the 1960s.⁶ The law (Title 16, Chapter 57) was last updated in 2006, and includes a robust definition of informed consent along with stronger restrictions on who is deemed unable to give consent.

In early fall 2020, news broke that migrant women in an ICE detention center in Georgia were allegedly sterilized without their consent.⁷ A few months later, pop superstar Britney Spears divulged to her fans that she was forced to have an intrauterine device implanted under the conservatorship of her father.⁸

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