Introduction

Theories of biologic racism and black reproductive inferiority were created by white gynecologists in the Antebellum South. There remains a question of how these ideas propagated into Northern "Free States," infiltrating both academic medical writing and clinical practice during the second half of the 19th century.

Narrative of a Black Woman’s Access to Care in Rhode Island

The Providence Medical Journal

Published quarterly by the Providence Medical Association.

APPENDICITIS IN WOMEN.*

By J. H. Davenport, M.D.

Providence, R. I.

Visiting Surgeon, Department of Gynecology, Rhode Island Hospital.


C. H., colored, aged thirty-seven, married seventeen years, never pregnant, admitted to the Rhode Island Hospital November 25, 1898. The catamenia began at fifteen, always regular and always excessive. She first noticed a swelling in the lower part of her abdomen about two years before. During the past year the swelling has increased, the menorrhagia has increased, she has had several attacks of severe pain and has lost flesh and strength. Examination showed the presence of large multiple fibroids in the posterior and right sides of the uterus crowding the cervix forward and to the left behind the symphysis pubis. Operation November 29, 1898; appendicectomy with supra-vaginal hysterectomy. Recovery. This case is of interest from the fact that not until the appendix had been involved were the symptoms of the fibroids so serious as to call for their removal.

5. Pregnancy. Appendicitis seems especially liable to occur in pregnant women and when so doing to be almost always of a serious nature. Several cases have been reported where the termination has been fatal, because owing to the difficulties in diagnosis the operation was deferred too long or the diagnosis was not made at all, and the patient succumbed to a general peritonitis which would be found at the autopsy to have been caused by a ruptured or gangrenous appendix vermiformis.

Methodology

Primary documents between 1852 and 1901 were identified among collections from the Rhode Island Medical Society, Providence Medical Journal, and other state public health records. Documents were accessed through the Providence Public Library, Brown University Library, or Hathitrust.org and analyzed using critical race theory.

Observations: Three Mechanisms of Racism

1. Prestige - The Rhode Island Medical Society gave the Fiske Award for best research in 1852 and 1856 to Southern gynecologists practicing on enslaved women.
2. Clinical - Rhode Island physicians applied theories of racialized medicine onto their own local patient populations. I.e., saying Black and Native women required less anesthesia during labor.
3. Access - Compared to patients like C.H., white women had greater access to longitudinal, fertility preserving care. In contrast, C.H. did not receive care until her pathology became academically "interesting."

References


Photography

Image of white and Black babies in the hospital nursery from "The Fourteenth Annual Report of the Providence Lying-in Hospital." 1898. (Standard Printing Company, Providence, RI), reprinted with permission by the Compliance Services department at Women and Infants Hospital, Providence, RI.

Acknowledgements

Thank you, Professor Daniel A. Rodriguez Ph.D., Manning Assistant Professor of History at Brown University for mentorship and Dr. Brian J. Riley, D.O., M.P.H., Program Director of Obstetrics & Gynecology Residency Program at St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center for sponsorship of this project.