

States forced sterilization on up to 100,000 since 1907

Eugenics movement was strong throughout century

By Joyce Price
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Americans stunned by recent disclosures that some 60,000 Swedish women were forcibly sterilized under a 40-year government program that ended in 1976 might be more shocked to learn that at least as many compulsory sterilizations occurred in this country in this century.

"I can say with absolute confidence that between 1907 and 1960, at least 60,000 Americans were sterilized pursuant to state involuntary-sterilization laws, and I am absolutely sure that was a floor, not a ceiling," said Dr. Philip Reilly, director of the Shriver Center for the mentally retarded in Boston.

"There were probably another 10,000 to 15,000 [such] sterilizations that were done," said Dr. Reilly, author of "The Surgical Solution," a history of the eugenics movement in the United States.

Eugenics is the science of improving a breed or species by carefully selecting parents and otherwise controlling hereditary factors in the production of offspring.

Garland E. Allen, professor of biology at Washington University in St. Louis, who is an expert on eugenics history, described the eugenics movement as "quite strong in this country, especially in the '30s."

During the 1920s and 1930s, more than 30 states, including Virginia, enacted compulsory-sterilization laws, most of them targeted at people who were institutionalized and were mentally retarded or mentally ill.

Many of those laws, which in some cases affected those in prisons and poorhouses, were not repealed until the 1960s.

Mr. Allen said a cumulative study of forced sterilizations in the United States confirmed about 60,000 surgeries had been performed as of the early 1960s. "But that was probably a low estimate," he said in a telephone interview. "There could have been 100,000."

Decried as immoral and unethical today, laws allowing state agents to select people for sterilization were viewed by advocates as being beneficial for society and the victims when they were en-

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acted, Dr. Reilly said in a telephone interview.

Many prominent Americans — including Presidents Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson and Calvin Coolidge, first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, and Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger — and British luminaries, such as authors H.G. Wells and Aldous Huxley and economist John Maynard Keynes, endorsed eugenics as a way of building a stronger, healthier society.

Eugenics proponents advocated barring reproduction by the "feeble-minded" and those with certain hereditary conditions so that "their genes would not be passed on," said Mr. Allen, who pointed out that "some who were sterilized weren't even mentally retarded."

Mrs. Sanger advocated eugenics in the Birth Control Review, a publication she edited until 1938. "More children for the fit, less for the unfit," she wrote in the May 1919 issue.

It was a message many states were heeding, with the full support of the courts.

"No state courts ever overturned sterilization laws, and the Supreme Court never overturned them either," said Dr. Reilly, who noted that the high court upheld Virginia's law, passed in 1924, in a 1927 ruling.

Many of the doctors who sterilized severely retarded women saw the surgery as "helpful," he said, because it ensured the women would not become pregnant in the event they were sexually assaulted and because it "meant they didn't have to worry about menses."

Such arguments were still being used to justify the surgeries in the '70s. Largely forgotten in the debate over President Clinton's failed nomination of Dr. Henry W.

Foster Jr. as U.S. surgeon general was a report Dr. Foster wrote, published in a medical journal in 1976, in which he discussed performing hysterectomies on some "severely" retarded women in the late '60s and early '70s.

The White House said it knew of the report before nominating Dr. Foster, saying such sterilizations represented "medical thinking at that time." It noted that the nominee no longer believed such surgeries were acceptable.

While state legislation was largely responsible for most of the involuntary sterilizations performed in the United States, the federal government had a hand in some surgeries involving Indian women and unwed teens on welfare.

"There was a definite federal program of sterilizing Indian women that was run by the federal Indian board ... which started in the '50s and continued through the '70s and which was brought to light by some Indian-rights groups in the '80s," said David Morrison of the Population Research Institute.

Mr. Allen also cited cases in which some family-planning clinics, funded by the old Department of Health, Education and Welfare, tried to force sterilization on unmarried women who received welfare "after their second illegitimate child."

"But the whistle got blown, and that was stopped in the mid-1970s," he said.

Dr. Reilly cited a lawsuit filed in 1973 by a black Alabama couple who charged that two of their daughters, ages 12 and 14, were sterilized without their consent at a federally funded family-planning clinic. The couple said clinic medical personnel also tried to sterilize a third daughter, who was 17 and on welfare, but she resisted. Publicity about that lawsuit prompted other black women on public assistance in the South to step forward with similar disclosures.

Nevertheless, Dr. Reilly said blacks as a group were not targeted by coercive sterilization programs. "Most sterilizations occurred in the Northern and Western states and targeted whites," he said.