

Forced sterilization



Throughout history there have always been circumstances where the government has required citizens to undergo some sort of medical procedure. Even though some of these procedures were commonplace in the past, they are now considered ethically wrong. Forced sterilization is an example of this, because it denies a woman of the ability to bare children, and denies a man the ability to inseminate.

Sterilization is defined as ‘ the act of making an organism barren or infertile (unable to reproduce)’. When most people hear the words ‘ forced sterilization’ the first thing that often comes to mind are the Nazis. In the 1930’s the Nazis introduced a massive, compulsory sterilization of a large segment of the German population (Rosenberg, Jennifer). The government believed that the Germans with the best genes had been killed off in the Second World War, while those with the worse genes stayed behind and didn’t fight, and were then free to procreate more of their ‘ bad genes’.

Believing that that the preservation of the optimal German genes were more important than an individual’s rights, the government had the authority to do whatever it took to preserve these optimal genes. However, Germany was not the first country to perform forced sterilization (Rosenberg, Jennifer). Even though in the United States we tend to overlook this as something that did not happen, it did. It is part of our past, and will always be part of American history.

During the 1900’s the United States had a eugenics program in which the purpose was to attempt to perfect the gene pool, with the idea that if society’s degenerates, like criminals and the mentally ill were barred from having children then society’s problems would disappear (Webster

University). American biologists like Charles B. Davenport and Harry H. Laughlin supported the idea of keeping the Anglo-American race pure. Their belief was that most ailments and social problems were hereditary, like poverty and criminality (Piotrowski, Crista). Therefore, people with ‘good genes’ should be encouraged to pass on their genes by having more children, while those with ‘bad genes’ should be barred from reproducing. There were many types of people who fell under the label of being genetically inferior. This included epileptics, manic-depressives, prostitutes, alcoholics, the homeless, and criminals. People who fell under any one of these categories or who caught the negative attention of authorities were deemed ‘feeble-minded’ by the court, and were legally forced to undergo sterilization (Piotrowski, Crista). Several other countries used forced sterilization as well, though for different reasons.

Peru, for example, was faced with a large population jump and not enough resources to support all the people. So they came up with a solution: making a target number of the amount of people to be sterilized every year, which would effectively lower the population if the plan worked. In 1996, it was 100,000. It was not met that year, but the target for the next year was increased to 130,000 and in that year, the quota was met. Even though sterilization can be performed on both men and women, it is mostly women who are victims of forced sterilization since they are the one who actually have babies (Webster University).

About 40 years ago in North Carolina, it wasn’t uncommon that a single mother on welfare, or a mental patient in a hospital to be forcibly and unknowingly sterilized against their will. Of course at the time, over half of all

the states in the U. S. had eugenics laws well into the 1970's (Rose, Julie). North Carolina is currently thinking of compensating the victims of forced sterilization, most of whom were poor and uneducated, blacks and whites alike. One woman, Elaine Riddick, now 57, was sterilized at age fourteen because the state deemed her promiscuous and a trouble maker.

Riddick was actually a young girl living in poverty and hunger, and was a victim of rape. While giving birth through C-section to her only son, the product of said rape, the doctors also sterilized her. There was consent form on which Riddick's illiterate grandmother signed the go-ahead for the procedure with an ' X'. What's worse is that Riddick didn't find out about her being sterile until she was married, 19, and trying to have more children. Riddick is just one of the many sharing the same story. Nearly 7, 600 men and women as young as 10 have been sterilized in North Carolina.

Social workers would coerce women to have the operation under threat of losing their public assistance, because sterilization was viewed as a way to cut spending on public welfare (Julie Rose). Forced sterilization is a procedure that violates several medical ethics, which is defined as a system of moral principles that apply values and judgments to the practice of medicine (Wikipedia). This procedure violates three medical ethics: autonomy, beneficence, and non-maleficence. Every patient is given the right to choose or refuse treatment: the right of autonomy.

However, forced sterilization doesn't give the patient the chance or ability to make the decision themselves, because the government chooses for them. Beneficence explains that a doctor must always act on a treatment or procedure that is in the best interest of the patient. Sterilization wasn't in

any way in the best interest of the patients it was performed on. It was only in the best, selfish, interests of the government who wanted to keep the Anglo-American race ' pure' and eradicate social problems. Forced sterilization also violates non-maleficence, which simply translates to three words: Do No Harm.

Many of the patients that were sterilized underwent the procedure without their own knowledge, not knowing of their barren status until years after when they began to question their failed attempts at having children. I am completely against this concept of the government forcing its citizens to do a medical procedure against their will, or performing it while the patient is unaware of it is beyond inconsiderate. It's cruel, and plainly said, it's downright shady.

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