

Hysteria

By Lara Bennett

There are hundreds, possibly thousands, of adult toy companies in the world today. Americans alone spend \$2 billion a year on sex toys. However, very few people know the strange history of how the vibrator came to be the most popular sex toy in the world.

Our story begins in ancient Greece. Hysteria literally translates as "wandering uterus." Plato himself described the uterus as a living creature that crept around a woman's body and caused her all sorts of ailments. In the second century AD, Roman physician Galen believed hysteria was caused by sexual deprivation. In the Middle Ages, "suffocation of the mother" was thought to be caused by "the retaining of corrupt and venomous uterine humors." A British physician in the late 1600s claimed that hysteria was the most common disease second only to fever. The problem of this "feminine affliction" continued to increase. By the second half of the nineteenth century, a French physician asserted that a quarter of all women suffered from hysteria.

The range of symptoms categorized as hysterical included everything from anxiety, sleeplessness, fatigue, irritability, fainting (we can thank corsets for that), and muscle spasms; to character "flaws" such as excessive gregariousness, emotional excitability, exhibiting strong emotions, sexual desire, rebelliousness, or "a tendency to cause trouble." Of course, the latter were viewed by physicians as problematic only because they were traits believed to be excluded from the social concept of a feminine nature.

Not coincidentally, this was around the time proto-feminist philosophy was on the verge of coming into public discourse, as well as stirrings of the suffrage and civil rights movements. Feminist scholars believe that the overdiagnosis of hysteria was a means for the patriarchal medical community to pathologize women's newfound sense of entitlement to the same rights men had; as well as a way of maintaining control over women's bodies and denying them sexual autonomy.

Following Galen's advice, in 1653 a Dutch physician published a medical encyclopedia in which he recommended "pelvic massage" as a treatment for this female affliction, bringing mainstream attention to a treatment which had been used for centuries in other parts of the world. Midwives and doctors would use their hands and fingers, anointed with essential oils, to massage the patient's vulva until a "hysterical paroxysm" occurred. In this pre-Victorian era, Westerners firmly believed that women were completely incapable of experiencing sexual pleasure unless being penetrated by a penis. Therefore, the medical community mistook the female orgasm for said corrupt and venomous humors being purged, sending the straying uterus back to its proper place.

Because pelvic massage was a treatment and not a cure, it guaranteed doctors a steady income, as patients would have to make frequent visits in order to keep their hysterical symptoms under control. But physicians viewed the practice as tedious, undesirable work, as they sometimes spent hours bringing a woman to paroxysm, resulting in hand cramps and tremors. Doctors soon began to envision methods to make the process more efficient and satisfying, which would allow them to accommodate more patients, guaranteeing more income.

In 1869, American doctor George Taylor invented the first steam-powered vibrating

machine. It was a large table with a cut out for a vibrating sphere. In 1880, Joseph Mortimer Granville invented the first electric vibrator which looked like a small drill with a sphere on the end and ran on a 40-pound battery. According to the doctor, he intended it only to be used for massaging male patients' sore muscles. But once patented, American physicians quickly adopted the device to deliver desired results in mere minutes. Their female patients were also quite pleased. In the next several decades, portable vibrators became widely available as women's health aids, as advertised in periodicals such as the Sears-Roebuck catalog and *Ladies Home Journal*.

Just as suddenly, the vibrator disappeared from both doctors' offices and mainstream catalogs. Rachel Maines, PhD describes the vibrator's disappearance and attached stigma as the result of three key events. In the 1920s, Sigmund Freud studied hysterical cases and found that the cause was not biological, but the result of repressed psychological trauma occurring in childhood. He discovered that hysteria could in fact be cured through psychoanalysis. Freud also revealed that repressed sexual desire was a major factor in pathological behavior.

At this time, Freud and other sexologists were bringing public awareness to the fact that female sexuality actually exists. The medical community could no longer deny that pelvic massage brought about female orgasm, and that women were indeed able to experience agentic sexual pleasure. Finally, early pornographic films involving vibrators (for obviously non-medical purposes) surfaced; thus vibrators, and perhaps covertly, female sexual pleasure and agency, were swept out of the public eye, stigmatized as naughty and perverse.

In 1952, the American Psychological Association at last removed hysteria from its list of pathologies and disorders. French psychologist Charles Lasègue spoke of hysteria as a "wastepaper basket of medicine where one throws otherwise unemployed symptoms." The hysterical condition was clearly a farce. Feminist scholars agree that the "symptoms" were the result of women's dissatisfaction with the limited array of lifestyle options society granted them. In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, which brought to public consciousness the fact that the traditional feminine role was unfulfilling. This book sparked the beginning of the Women's Movement, which swiftly moved from more conservative aspirations, such as women entering the workforce, to more radical ones involving sexual issues. At a National Organization for Women conference in 1973, pioneering sex-positive feminist Betty Dodson publicly advocated the Hitachi Magic Wand as the perfect tool for encouraging women to reclaim their bodies and control over their own sexual pleasure.

As female sexuality and sexual discourse became increasingly more acceptable and visible, vibrators did as well. In 1998, on the HBO series *Sex and the City*, characters divulged their use of the Rabbit vibrator as well as various "massagers" from Sharper Image. In 2009, Oprah featured a segment on her show with Dr. Laura Berman, a licensed sex educator who openly answered questions about female sexuality and encouraged the use of sex toys. The 2011 film *Hysteria* portrayed Dr. Granville's (extremely fictionalized) invention as well as the medical establishment's methodology in treating hysteria.

Although not all stigma has been removed from the use of sex toys and agentic female pleasure, that annual \$2 billion can't be ignored. Our society is beginning to be open to the idea that vibrators are still indeed a treatment, a cure, a means to better health, both mentally and physically.