

Exercise, Physical Capability and the Eternally Wounded Woman in 19th Century North America

PATRICIA VERTINSKY

University of British Columbia

During the latter part of the nineteenth century arguments about women's limited physical and mental capacity and the centrality of reproduction for understanding women's bodies defined medical views of women's health and the productive boundaries of their lives. Ostensibly basing their views upon new scientific evidence, influential medical practitioners, many of whom were men, utilized pseudo-scientific theories about the effects of the reproductive life cycle upon women's physical capabilities to control the life choices of middle class women and set limits upon their activities.

Though women were held to be victims of their reproductive apparatus in general, the onset of menstruation and its recurring cycle were believed to be the cause of particular handicap. Women's limited physical achievements as compared to men were increasingly ascribed to the difficulties of menstruation. The onset of menses at puberty was considered an illness to be weathered only with particular care. For the next thirty years of life's pilgrimage, women were advised to look upon themselves as invalids once a month, curtailing both physical and mental activity during the "catamential week" lest they succumb to accidents, disease and loss of fertility.

The widespread notion that women were chronically weak, and that they had only a finite amount of mental and physical energy due to the recurring fact of menstruation had a strong effect upon the medical profession's attitude and consequently the public's attitude toward female exercise and participation in sport. The special relationship which existed between the physician and the Victorian middle class woman enabled the medical profession to exert a moral influence far beyond specific diagnoses and prescriptions. The physician became an eloquent defender of the status quo and, as an arbiter of fashion and judge of personal needs, was able to convince women of their special need for constant medical guardianship. With this mandate, doctors could make judgments as to who was physically fit and who was not (these judgments carrying with them implications of being fit or unfit for particular tasks, physical activities and sports).

This paper explores how longstanding propositions about women's capacity for sport and exercise developed in response to late nineteenth century physicians' interpretations of biological theories about menstruation. Looked upon as "an eternal wound," an illness, and as a shortcoming, menstruation came to be seen as a process which required certain kinds of moderate physical activity, suitable exercises in the open air, and sport appropriate for physical renewal. As a pathological condition, however, it necessitated the exclusion of women from vigorous and competitive sports and from any physical exertion which the medical experts considered overtaxing. Thus, advice concerning exercise and physical activity came to reflect and perpetuate understandings about women's "abiding sense of physical weakness" and the unchangeable nature of her physical inferiority.



Nearly everyone who attended the convention visited Expo 86.