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July 11, 2003

Liberal California confronts years of forced sterilisation

BY CHRIS AYRES

HIGHLIGHTING a revelation showing that California was not always the home of liberal politics, the state is considering a formal apology to at least 20,000 people who were sterilised against their will between the early 1900s and late 1960s as part of a eugenics programme designed to strengthen the Aryan gene pool.

The programme was sanctioned by the Supreme Court and provided a blueprint for Adolf Hitler's Third Reich, which borrowed heavily from American laws when introducing forced sterilisation for its own "undesirables".

The enthusiasm of white, wealthy Californians for racial streamlining in the 1920s was lampooned in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which satirised one of the most popular books on the subject, *The Rising Tide of Colour* by Lothrop Stoddart.

Although California's eugenics programme was initially aimed at the mentally ill and physically disabled, some historians say that it was also used to stop Mexican and Asian immigrants from having families.

One of the most influential eugenics proponents was Ezra Gosney, a citrus magnate from Pasadena, who founded the Human Betterment Foundation in 1926. His supporters included Harry Chandler, publisher of *The Los Angeles Times*, which ran a story in 1935 under the headline of *Why Hitler Says: 'Sterilise the Unfit!'* It went on: "Here, perhaps, is an aspect of the new Germany that America, with the rest of the world, can little afford to criticise."

Other eugenics enthusiasts included Charles Goethe, founder of the Eugenics Society of Northern California, who said in 1929 that the Mexican was "eugenically as low-powered as the Negro. He not only does not understand health rules: being a superstitious savage, he resists them." Today, Goethe has a public park named after him in Sacramento, the state capital. Although American eugenics was practised most widely in California, 31 other states had similar programmes to "clean up the gene pool".

In North Carolina the state has ordered an inquiry into its own eugenics programme and in Oregon, the state's Governor has apologised in person to some of the victims of forced sterilisation.

Although Gray Davis, the California Governor, issued an apology in March to the victims of the state's programme, the California Senate has yet to pass a resolution on the subject.

The statement proposed by Senator Dede Alpert, a Democrat, would express "profound regret" over the state's involvement and urge "every citizen of the state to become familiar with the history of the eugenics movement, in the hope that a more educated and tolerant populace will reject any similar abhorrent pseudoscientific movement should it arise in the future".

Critics, however, have called the apology

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Others, such as Paul Lombardo, a University of Virginia historian, said that the Governor's apology was premature, because the State of California did not even know how many people were involuntarily sterilised.

Even the date when the forced sterilisation programme ended is unknown, although it may have been as late as 1969. Patient confidentiality rules have made research difficult and forced sterilisations remained legal until 1979.

Anyone with "mental disease" could be sterilised if doctors thought the condition could be passed to descendants. Mental disease was a loose term, used to cover everything from epilepsy to homosexuality.

Some women were sterilised for being "promiscuous". Although it is widely believed eugenics was also used mainly against non-whites, no survey of the racial profile of sterilisation patients has ever been conducted.

There is plenty of evidence, however, that non-whites were targets. One popular 1926 California eugenics textbook said: "The Negro lacks in his germ plasm (a term for hereditary material) excellence of some qualities which are essential for success in competition with the civilizations of the white races at the present day."

Even poor rural whites were considered a "degenerate" form.

Some doctors, however, have argued that they regarded sterilisation as a humane treatment for patients, along with lobotomies and other practices that have since been discredited.

"In practice, we didn't sterilise the severely retarded," said Dr William Keating, a California surgeon at the Sonoma State Home for the Feeble-Minded during the 1950s, in a recent interview with *The Los Angeles Times*.

"They had very little opportunity for sex. The people we concentrated on were people who were moderately retarded, who had a chance of going out and getting pregnant."

Tony Platt, Emeritus Professor of Social Work at California State University and a eugenics expert, recently asked the California Senate judiciary committee to give researchers full access to internal records, on condition that patients' identities are protected.

"As we now grapple with public policies pertaining to genetic technologies that promise to solve global problems of disease and malnutrition, it is important to remember the legacy of eugenics," he told the committee.

"In the name of human betterment, scientific ideas and practices can be used to promote and reproduce extraordinary inequalities."



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