Sex, Syphilis, and Suspect Sisterhood
Female Physicians, Venereal Diseases, and Sex Instruction in early-twentieth century America
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Background
- During the Progressive era (1890s-1920s), sanitation and disease prevention emerged as leading public concerns. Through the women’s club, settlement house, and temperance movements, women asserted expertise regarding these issues and politicised the domestic. Contemporaneously, the Spanish-American War (1908) and US entrance to WWI (1917), agitated concern for male soldiers’ health, particularly regarding Venereal Diseases (VD).
- This was an auspicious moment for female physicians. In parallel to medical efforts to treat VD in the army, female physicians sought to instigate social, moral, cultural, and medical change on the home front.

Significance
- Debates regarding women’s health and access to medical care are resurfacing in contemporary America. It is hence a pertinent time to challenge our assumptions by seeking historical perspectives on these issues.
- This enquiry contributes to the historical understanding of the Progressive era: how medical professionals asserted themselves as public health authorities and engaged with prominent concerns regarding syphilis and gonorrhoea. This enquiry also addresses broader historical questions in gender history: the nature of female homosocial relationships, and how gender operated relative to other socio-cultural factors in the early-twentieth century.

Challenges and Limitations
- An analysis focusing predominantly on female physicians’ published material is limited by a tension between public performance and private practice. The extent to which female physicians’ rhetorical focus critiquing women who engaged in extramarital sex and had VD was reflected in their private activities, conduct, and interactions, is suspect.
- Female physicians’ marginal position in the profession (which had subsided since their first entrance, yet continued) would likely have inhibited the expression of divergent views in their public writing and personal papers.

Abbreviations
SMC — Social Morality Committee, consisting of female physicians
ASHA — American Social Hygiene Association
VD — Venereal Diseases

Future Research Questions
- What could be learned about the work of female physicians and VD through a linguistic analysis of their writings and lectures?
- What would an explicitly comparative approach reveal about the gendered way in which male and female physicians approached VD?
- How did race and ethnicity feature female physicians’ approaches to VD?