

Archival Gynecology

Using Archival Materials to Assess Social and Medical Views of Reproductive Health in Progressive Era Los Angeles

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The Progressive Era



The Progressive Era spanned from the 1890s through the 1920s in the United States. It was characterized by social and political reform. Many of these reforms that Progressives of the time advocated for involved public health reform. Major examples include the opening of new hospitals and the introduction of free vaccine programs. These reforms, however, were often rooted in racist, classist, and sexist ideologies. Health reforms, in particular, sprouted from the idea that white men were the benchmark against which health, both physical and mental, were judged. This is made clear in how women's health, specifically their reproductive health, is discussed and thought of at the time by medical professionals, the general public, and even among women themselves.

King's Eclectic Obstetrics (Wintermute and King, 1892)

King's Eclectic Obstetrics is a medical text first published in 1892 with many passages containing language that reflects the way that medical professionals thought about women's bodies and their health. The main topics of the book are anatomy, menstruation, pregnancy, and abortion, as well as surgical procedures such as oophorectomies (where one or both ovaries are removed). In his description of female anatomy, Robert Wintermute describes "woman" as having "peculiar physical, mental, moral, and sentimental peculiarities."¹ This statement speaks to the common historical belief that women are unusual and strange in comparison to men, who are the benchmark against which everyone else can be judged. This sentiment defines women as mysterious and confusing, which excused doctors from trying to understand the experiences of women.

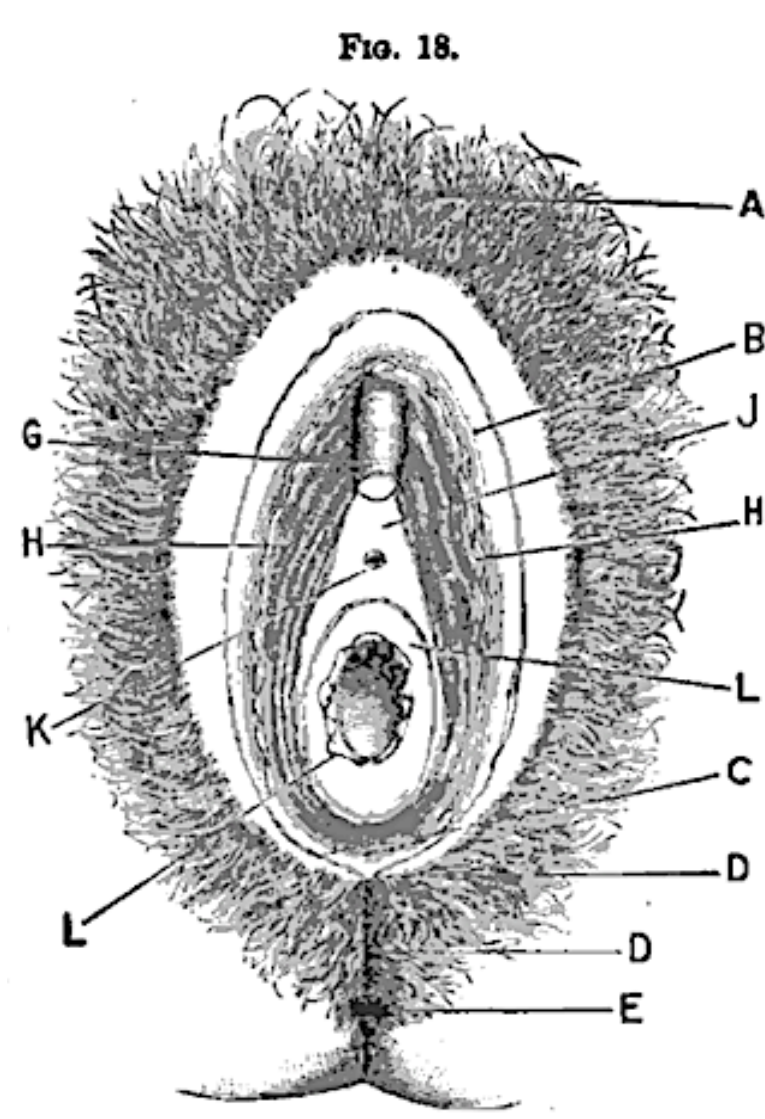
Figure 1: A diagram of "The External Female Organs Of Generation" that mentions the clitoris in its key (F), but does not label its location on the diagram. Adapted from Wintermute and King (1892), page 61, Public Domain.

Later in the anatomy section of the book, Wintermute starts to discuss physical anatomy, with interesting passages in relation to the hymen and the clitoris. Wintermute describes the clitoris as an organ, whose sole purpose is pleasure,² which stands out given the lack of focus on women's sexual pleasure in the early 20th century.

In a diagram of "The External Female Organs Of Generation",³ the clitoris is mentioned in the key (Figure 1, highlighted), but it is not actually labeled on the diagram. This is a common practice for medical texts of the era.⁴ It is likely because of repressive views of the time that discouraged women's sexuality on the grounds of vulgarity. He also discusses how the hymen is not an accurate measure of virginity because it could be "destroyed" in several ways other than sex.⁵ This is especially interesting given the era because, even today, the hymen is often thought of as a marker of virginity. The use of the word "destroyed" is also an interesting choice, as it associates the breaking of the hymen with an act of violence.

Later in the book, Wintermute goes on to describe menstruation, beginning many sentences in this section and others with "the female".^{6,7} Referring to women with this kind of language dehumanizes them and thus reduces them to medical specimens, which seems to be how they were often perceived by medical professionals of the era. Wintermute then goes on to state that when a woman begins menstruating, she "manifests strong attractive feelings toward the opposite sex," displays "a great fondness for children," "loses her playfulness," and becomes "the most perfect combination of modesty, devotion, patience, affection, gratitude, loveliness, and Christian virtue."⁸ These excerpts display a very stereotypical and idealized view of womanhood, in which women fall in love with men, have children, and never cause any trouble. This view of womanhood is, however, a fantasy that this medical textbook and many others of the time propagated in clinical settings. Including descriptions like this in medical texts allowed doctors to diagnose deviance from this fantasy as an illness to be treated and cured.

When Wintermute discusses abortion, he names three different types: *spontaneous* (not caused by an external force), *accidental* (caused by some external force, but not intentional), and *designed* (intentionally caused by some external force).⁹ In the Progressive Era, only "designed" abortions were illegal, which makes the use of the word "designed" noteworthy. The word does not ascribe any negative connotations to the act of intentional abortion, despite its illegal status and negative social reputation.



THE EXTERNAL FEMALE ORGANS OF GENERATION.
A. The Mons Veneris.
B. The Labia Exteriora, or Labia Pudendi.
C. The Fourchette, or Posterior Commissure of the Vulva.
D. D. The Perineum, extending from the Posterior Commissure of the Vulva to the Anus.
E. The Anus.
F. The Clitoris.
G. The Prepuce of Clitoris.
H. The Nymphæ, or Labia Interna.
I. The Vestibulum.
K. The Meatus Urinaris.
L. The Hymen.

Figure 1: A diagram of "The External Female Organs Of Generation" that mentions the clitoris in its key (F), but does not label its location on the diagram

The Diseases of Women: A Handbook for Students and Practitioners (Bland-Sutton and Giles, 1910)

This text from 1910 also contains many passages that shed light on medical views on women's health at the time. Unlike Wintermute's book, this text asserts that the hymen is a signifier of virginity¹⁰. However, later in the book, the authors state that there are, in fact, other ways for the hymen to be broken and that the hymen may not be broken by sex¹¹. Like Wintermute, the authors do not, however, denounce the concept of virginity. They still seem to care about women's virginity; they simply acknowledge that the hymen is not always an accurate measure of it.

Figure 2: A diagram of "Generative Organs of the Female" which, unlike Figure 1, mentions the clitoris and labels its location. The book then continues in its discussion of anatomy to describe the clitoris as a "rudimentary penis,"¹² which not only denotes a male standard but also implies inferiority. Similar to Wintermute's book, this text also refers to women with dehumanizing terms such as "the female organism."¹³ In their description of the vagina, the authors state that it "receives the penis during copulation."¹⁴ The use of the word "receives" implies that women take a passive role in sex, thus stripping them of their autonomy and agency.

Figure 2 depicts a diagram of the "Generative Organs of the Female" found in this textbook. Unlike Figure 1, this diagram mentions the clitoris and labels its location. This change could potentially be due to the fact that this textbook was published 18 years later. One of many medical conditions that the book discusses is vaginismus (vaginal pain during sex). The book states that if an anatomical reason for the condition cannot be found, then it must be caused by "hysterical or nervous women"¹⁵ and should thus be "cured" by sedatives¹⁶. This is indicative of how doctors at the time cared far more about men being able to have sex than about women's pain. Nothing is said regarding whether or not women consent to this treatment or the extent of sedation that is prescribed. Like the Wintermute text, this book also differentiates types of abortion. The term "abortion" is used primarily to refer to miscarriages and accidental abortions. Intentional abortions are instead referred to as "criminal abortions."¹⁷ Unlike Wintermute, these authors use language to take a firm moral stance about intentional abortion, painting the women who perform and receive them as morally reprehensible and criminal. This type of classification is consistent with the legal classification of abortions as either "therapeutic" or "criminal"¹⁸. The authors also assert that most women die during "criminal abortions." This, however, is misleading. Most abortions in the era were carried out in private, and most women survived the process¹⁹. Successful abortions, therefore, were never mentioned publicly. When women did die from a "criminal" abortion, it was usually because of complications that neither the woman nor her abortion provider was unable to seek emergency medical care for fear of getting into legal trouble. It is because of these factors that it is difficult to make a definitive assertion as to the safety of "criminal" abortions.

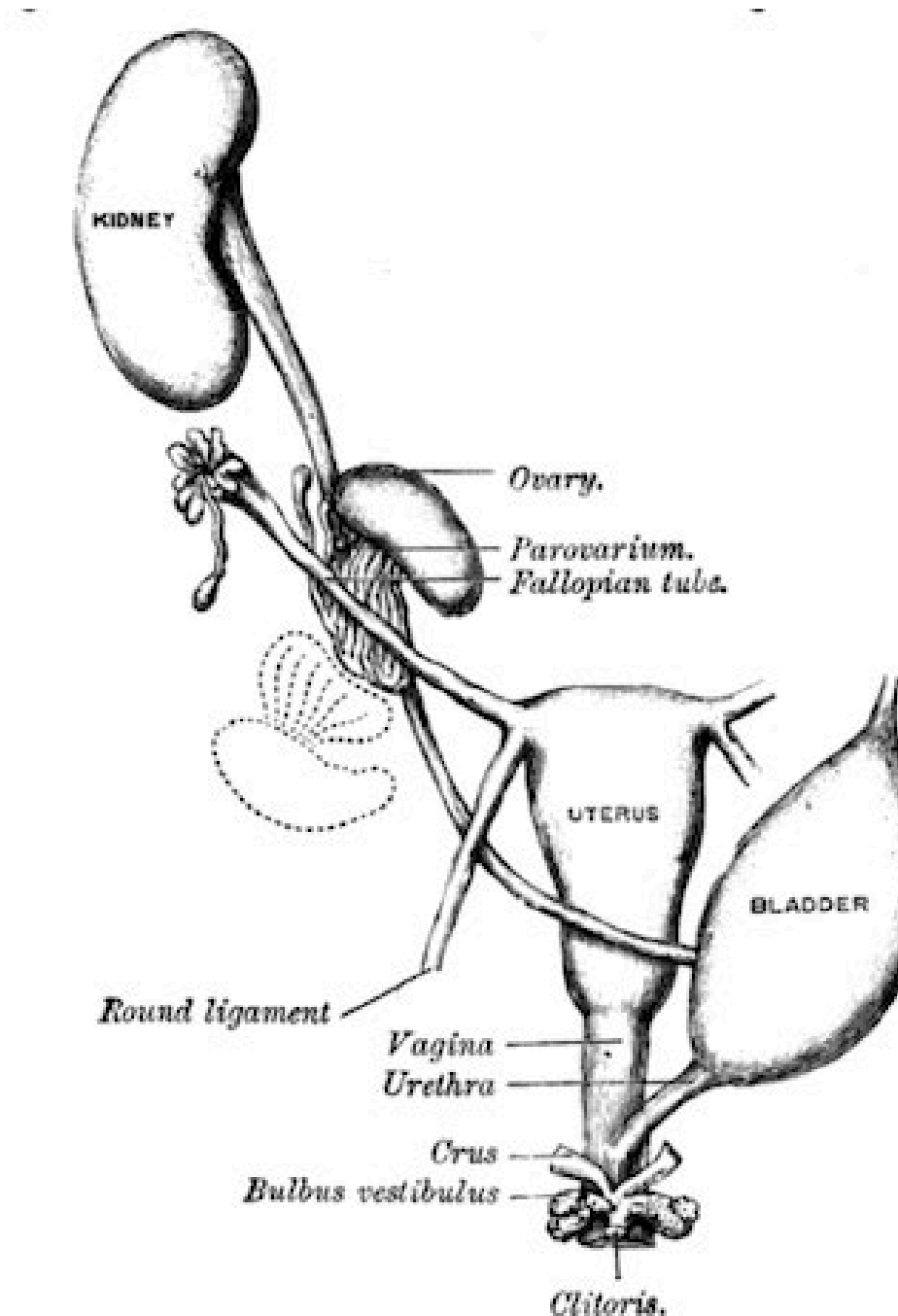


FIG. 10.—GENERATIVE ORGANS OF THE FEMALE (HENSEL).

Figure 2: A diagram of "Generative Organs of the Female" which, unlike Figure 1, mentions the clitoris and labels its location.

Dr. Walter Lindley

Dr. Walter Lindley, born in 1852, received his MD in 1875 from Long Island College Hospital in Brooklyn²⁰. After this, he moved to Los Angeles, where he began his career in medicine and public health²¹. Throughout his career, he served as the secretary²², then president²³ of the Los Angeles County Medical Association, county health officer²⁴, LA Health Officer²⁵, and county physician²⁶. He was also one of the founders of the College of Medicine of the University of Southern California²⁷. He served as the chair of both obstetrics and gynecology at the university and eventually became dean of the College of Medicine²⁸. Lindley also helped found the Los Angeles County Hospital, which opened in 1898²⁹. In addition to his career in medicine, Lindley kept scrapbooks containing newspaper clippings, letters, and documents regarding his life and career. The following images were found in one of these scrapbooks. Making scrapbooks was a common practice at the time because it allowed people to keep things that were important to them in one place³⁰.

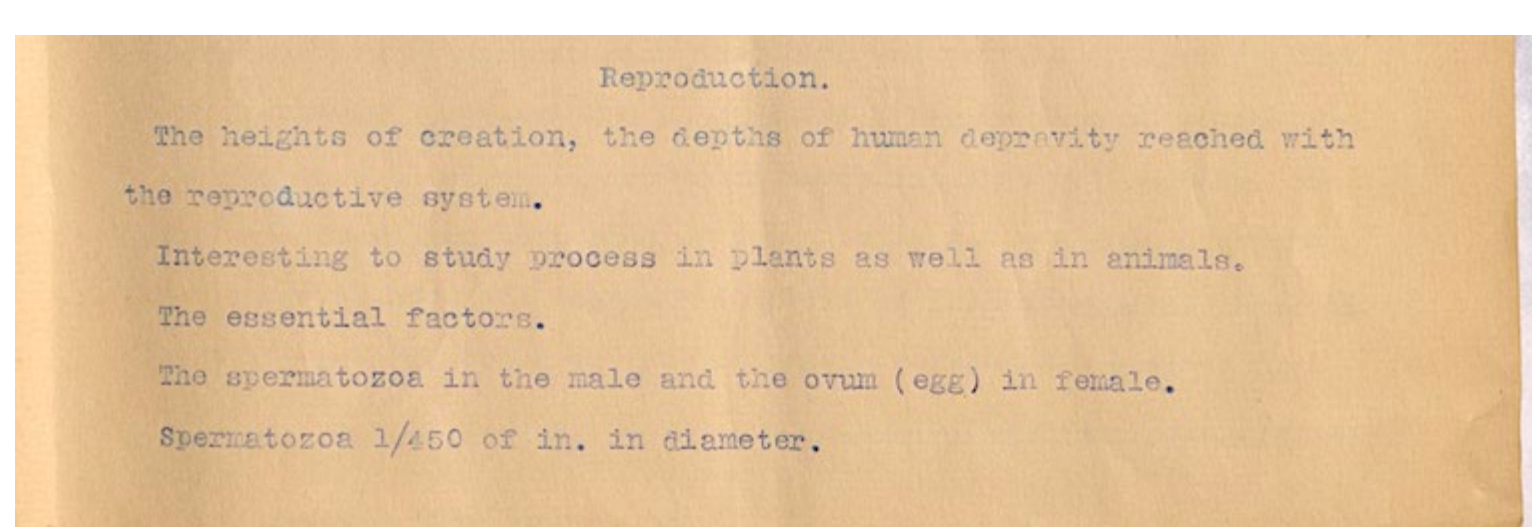


Figure 4: Dr. Walter Lindley describes the reproductive system (Dr. Walter Lindley Scrapbooks, Special Collections, Honnold/Mudd Library, Claremont University Consortium.)

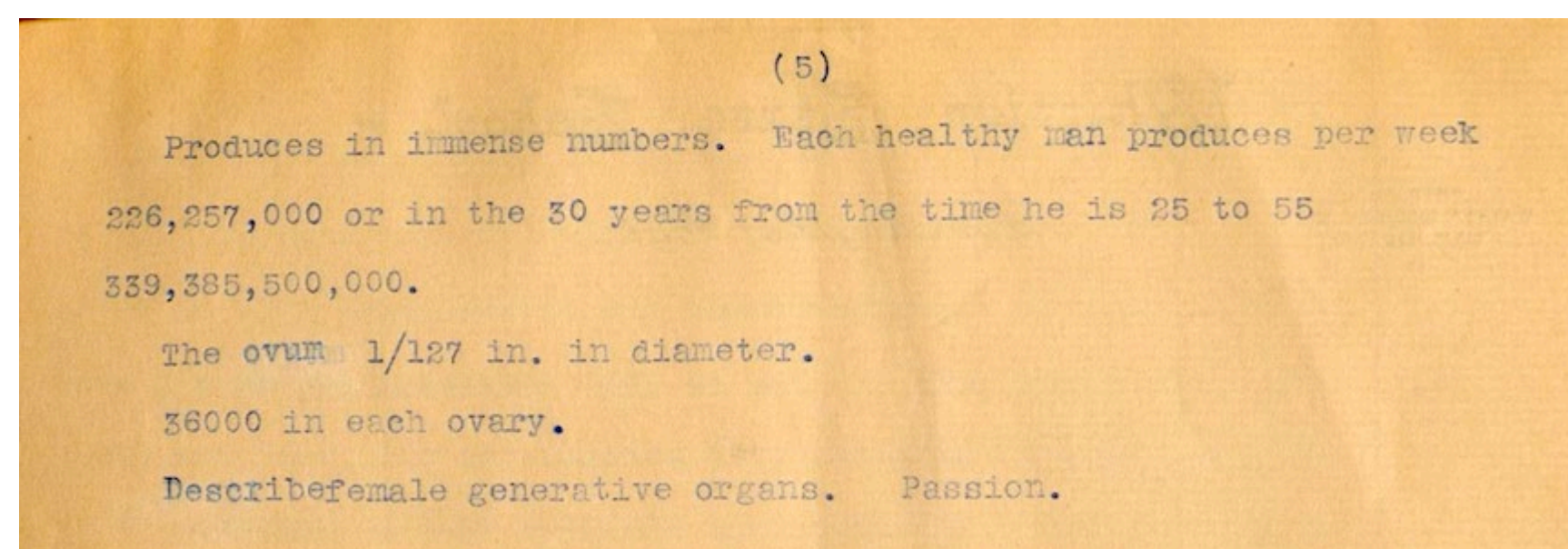


Figure 5: Dr. Walter Lindley describes the reproductive system cont. (Dr. Walter Lindley Scrapbooks, Special Collections, Honnold/Mudd Library, Claremont University Consortium.)

These images, found in one of Lindley's scrapbooks are from a collection of typewritten documents by Lindley in which he describes the various systems of the human body. As you can see in the first highlighted section, Lindley has very interesting views on human reproduction. In his description of the reproductive system as "the depths of human depravity reached" in figure 2, he echoes a common view of the era - that sexual activity is morally charged. In the highlighted portion of figure 3, he comments specifically on the "female generative organs", describing them as "passion". This reflects a romanticized view of sex.

The seemingly conflicting perceptions of sex as vulgar versus sex as romantic actually reflect societal views of sex - specifically when it was deemed acceptable and when it wasn't. Unsurprisingly the distinction between the two is that sex is acceptable when it occurs within the context of heterosexual marriage. Deviations from this, specifically by young people, were grounds for a charge of delinquency or moral crimes at the time³¹. While anyone could be charged with these moral crimes, it was young women and girls who were put under more scrutiny - such as gynecological exams to assess virginity, even if the charge was not sexual in nature - and given harsher punishments - such as longer probationary periods - than young men and boys³². These cases and their outcomes were also heavily influenced by race, ethnicity, and class³³.

One of Dr. Walter Lindley's publications discusses how an oophorectomy might be used to cure epilepsy and insanity, as well as how an oophorectomy might affect someone who is otherwise healthy. He details a few cases and concludes that the efficacy of using oophorectomy to treat epilepsy and insanity is inconclusive given the evidence available. He states that, while some patients' epilepsy is alleviated for a time after the oophorectomy, it often comes back. Despite this, he states the following.

"we at least have the satisfaction of knowing that these afflicted patients will never reproduce themselves."³⁴ In this quote, Lindley seemingly advocates for the eugenicist belief practice of forcibly sterilizing those who are deemed unfit to reproduce. This is not surprising, given the eugenicist attitudes and policies of the Progressive Era.

In the discussion section of Lindley's paper, Dr. C. Von Hoffman, another gynecologist and obstetrician³⁵ states the following. "the extirpation of healthy ovaries has a peculiar effect on women. To remove them from a young girl before menstruation or before they had frequent intercourse, causes them to become stout, and they do not possess the peculiar roundness we admire in women."

While the potential benefits of oophorectomy were inconclusive at the time and the procedure did not have large success when it came to treating epilepsy, instead of discussing how a woman's health might be affected by unnecessarily removing healthy ovaries, Hoffman focuses on how it would affect her attractiveness.

Footnotes

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5. Wintermute and King. 66.
6. Wintermute and King. 100.
7. Wintermute and King. 191.
8. Wintermute and King. 102.
9. Wintermute and King. 249.
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32. Abrams and Curran. "Wayward Girls and Virtuous Women: Social Workers and Female Juvenile Delinquency in the Progressive Era." 53-54.
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34. Lindley, Walter. "Oophorectomy—Its Effect on the Mind and Nervous System." *California State Journal of Medicine* 1, no. 3 (1903): 84-86, 84.
35. Register, Official. "California State Journal of Medicine." *RED* 15, no. 8 (1917): 332, 332.

Figures

- Figure 1: Wintermute, Robert C., and John King. *King's Eclectic Obstetrics*. 9th ed. Cincinnati Ohio: Ohio Valley Co., 1896. 61.
- Figure 2: Bland-Sutton, John, and Arthur E. Giles. *The Diseases of Women: A Handbook For Students And Practitioners*. 6th ed. London: Reban Limited, 1909.
- Figure 3: Portrait of Walter Lindley from Press Reference Library Notables of the West, Volume II, 1915, page 395
- Figure 4: Lindley, Walter. "The Life and Times of Walter Lindley, M.D., 1852-1922, and the Founding of the California Hospital." *Southern California Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (1971): 303-15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/41170374>.
- Figure 5: Lindley, Walter. "Oophorectomy—Its Effect on the Mind and Nervous System." *California State Journal of Medicine* 1, no. 3 (1903): 84-86.
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