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News

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Charlotte resident Frank Hall says he was always curious why his stepfather, Fred Aslin, couldn't have children. When his stepfather pressured the state to release medical records in 1998, the family finally discovered why: In 1944, at the age of 18, Fred Aslin had been sterilized against his will, without having the procedure explained to him.

After Fred's father died, his mother was unable to cope with nine children, and in 1936 Aslin and most of his siblings became wards of the state at the Lapeer State Home. Although Aslin did well in school and held jobs outside the institution, the children were all labeled "feeble-minded morons" in the home's records. Reports from his teachers gave the young man the highest grades and indicated that he would be able to live independently upon reaching adulthood. "Fred is good in reading and shows splendid judgment," one teacher wrote. "He is the best trombone player I have thus far developed at the home," wrote another.

But the positive evaluations did not dissuade six Michigan physicians and two county probate judges from enforcing laws designed to sterilize the 75,000 Michigan residents□about 5 percent of whom were actually sterilized□ deemed at the time as having "mental deficiencies." Under the eugenics laws of the day, people who made a negative impression upon social welfare and public health authorities could be branded as "feeble-minded" by court order and forced to undergo sterilization.

Ultimately, the 20th-century "eugenics" movement led to the sterilization of more than 67,000 Americans, before coming to an end in the 1970s. The movement led to the victimization of a small, less privileged segment of society □ of people such as the part Native American Fred Aslin, who is a member of the Ottawa and Chippewa tribes.

In a telephone interview, Edwin Black, author of "The War against the Weak," a new history of eugenics, describes how the movement was made up of animal breeders, agronomists and anthropologists who were trying to engineer a society according to their own, elitist evolutionary views. Black, the son of Polish Holocaust survivors, argued that although influential supporters of the eugenics movement claimed they wanted to create a "better society," they really wanted to make "problem people" disappear.

Aslin's institutional records, filling more than 100 pages, show that he and 2,336 other people were sterilized at the Lapeer State Home as a result of this ruthless and discriminating state policy. In the 12 years of Aspin's stay at Lapeer, half a dozen medical doctors repeatedly passed on the diagnosis made by Doctors James F. Darby and William Charlton Edminson from St. Ignace that classified Aslin as a "feeble-minded moron."

Aslin's three brothers were also sterilized for having "mental defects" or being "low-grade morons," in diagnoses signed by the institution's medical superintendent, Dr. R.E. Cooper. The same fate was shared by one of his sisters.

Aslin's story made national news when he filed a lawsuit in 2000. But the case was dismissed because the relevant statute of limitations had expired. In fact, according to state records, Aslin is still "a moron" today. Although the state's Community Health Department director, James K. Haveman, offered a personal apology, no state order has ever been entered to reverse the diagnosis.

From the implementation of sterilization laws in 1923 and through the next four decades, at least 3,786 Michigan residents were sterilized. Among the 33 states that passed such legislation, Michigan ranked fourth highest for sterilizations (following California with 20,108 sterilizations, Virginia with 7,450 and North Carolina with 6,297).

Alexandra Stern, a University of Michigan history of medicine professor, believes Gov. Jennifer Granholm should reckon with this ugly chapter of state history. In editorials written in The Detroit News and The New York Times, Stern and a number of area historians have begun calling upon her to issue a formal apology. This needs to happen, they say, before the stories of Aslin and other sterilized Michigan residents are forgotten. Since 2002, Virginia, Oregon, North Carolina, South Carolina and California have all made public apologies.

Shadows of the past

In the 1920s, eugenics, also known as "racial hygiene," was a commonly accepted science in the United States, and many doctors accepted the misguided idea that "inferior" genetic traits, including low intelligence, needed to be controlled by preventing such people from having children. Michigan was one of the states to apply eugenic sterilization laws most aggressively.

Eugenics became popular due to the support of many different public leaders and interest groups, argues Stern. People like J.H. Kellogg, a thoracic surgeon and sanitarium owner, and Victor Vaughan, former dean of the University of Michigan's Medical School, were driven by the idea that eugenics would be linked with humanitarianism. They believed they could help poor people by sterilizing them while simultaneously helping the human race eliminate "bad genes" from its gene pool. The eugenics movement was also popular among animal breeders, who believed that if one could produce a pedigreed pig, one could also produce a pedigreed baby.

Kellogg, the inventor of the corn flake, is best known for developing innovative strategies to improve the diets of the poor. Yet he also supported the sterilization of the "unfit" and in 1911 established the influential Race Betterment Foundation with money from the Kellogg cereal fortune.

In 1914 Kellogg organized the first of three major national conferences on race betterment in Battle Creek. Amid an atmosphere of lavish banquets, he called for biological action in scientific research. Addressing the conference, Kellogg said: "We have wonderful horses, cows and pigs. Why would we not have a new and improved race of men?" He wanted the "whiter races of Europe to establish a Race of Human Thoroughbreds."

After a failed bill in 1897, the Michigan Legislature passed a sterilization law in 1913. With both Kellogg and Vaughan on the state board of health, Michigan became the seventh state to enact sterilization laws. Only one operation was performed before the practice was declared unconstitutional in 1918. After adding legal safeguards, and buoyed by the rising popularity of eugenics, however, Michigan passed a new and more carefully designed sterilization law in 1923.

In 1927, the U.S Supreme Court upheld Virginia's forced sterilization law. The case in question centered around a 17-year-old girl who'd been diagnosed "feeble-minded." Summing up the popularity the eugenics enjoyed at the time, Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, "Three generations of imbeciles are enough."

Soon thereafter, hundreds of Michigan residents who had been labeled "feeble-minded," "mentally defective" or "sexually deviant" were sterilized at the Lapeer State Home and Training School, the Ionia Reformatory, Jackson State Prison, at the University of Michigan hospital, and at other county and state facilities. The historical record indicates that sterilizations peaked in Michigan during the 1930s and 1940s, and diminished steadily during the 1950s and 1960s.

Although a bona fide medical diagnosis in its day, "feeble-mindedness" had virtually no clinical meaning and is no longer used in medical terminology. Many people who were classified as "feeble-minded" would now be seen as having learning disabilities, social or psychological problems, or as being merely the victims of poverty and racism.

Opposition to eugenics began even as the movement was being organized. By 1910, the equilibrium model developed by Godfrey N. Hardy and Wilhelm Weinberg showed that sterilization would never appreciably reduce the percentage of "mental defectives" in society. George Shull, at the Carnegie Station for Experimental Evolution, showed that hybrid corn plants were more vigorous than purebred ones, refuting the notion that "racial purity" offered any biological advantage, or that "race mixing" was dangerous.

Regardless of such findings, most geneticists still believed that affected individuals should not be allowed to reproduce.

The Nazi connection

Few people know that the United States actually helped to fund Nazi eugenics. In "The War Against the Weak," Black documents the collaboration of American corporate philanthropic organizations with Nazi Germany researchers in their common pursuit of the creation of a white, Nordic "master race."

From 1936 through 1939, Rockefeller fellowships allowed German genetic researchers to travel to U.S. medical laboratories for collaboration. The original funding for the German Nazi scientist Otmar Freiherr von Vershuer's research project on twins, which would be completed in Auschwitz by his assistant, Joseph Mengele, had been provided by the Rockefeller Foundation.

Rockefeller funding decreased only after 1936. Money continued to flow into eugenics projects in the United States, however.

In 1940, Lathrup Stoddard, a leader of the American Eugenics Research Association, celebrated Hitler and Nazi eugenics in his book "Into the Darkness." "Nothing is so distinctive in Nazi Germany as its ideas about race," wrote Stoddard.

In a chapter entitled, "I see Hitler," Stoddard described how Nazi minister Joseph Goebbels escorted him around Berlin and arranged his meeting with members of the Eugenics Court. Stoddard bemoaned the race tribunals, in which judges were making racial judgments of Jews and non-Jews, as being "almost too conservative." He was impressed by the velocity with which Nazi Germany had begun to apply what he saw as American ideals. By 1937, some 200,000 Germans of all backgrounds had been sterilized.

In a 2001 Michigan State University doctoral dissertation, "Dealing with Degeneracy: Michigan Eugenics in Context," historian Jeff Hodges argues that the Germans were not the originators of this practice. "They took them to extremes perhaps unimagined in the United States, but then perhaps they were imagined here, too." The justifications that German physicians and eugenics advocates used to rationalize their programs had already been rationalized in America, writes Hodges. "Even the most heinous of German eugenic actions had its American counterpart."

Even the euthanasia of defective newborns was advocated in Michigan, writes Hodges. Some physicians "set aside" the defective newborns while attending to the mother. "Though it never became law, the practice remained one of the dirty little secrets of the medical profession for decades."

Another example is the case of Dr. Udo J. Wile, who chaired the Department of Dermatology and Syphilology at the University of Michigan until 1947.

In 1913 and 1916, Wile carried out experiments at Pontiac State Hospital on patients with mental diseases. Utilizing a dental drill, he extracted brain tissue from living "insane" patients. During his tenure, Wile trained more than 50 dermatologists, many of whom went on to have important careers.

A controversy recently arose when Wile was inducted into the Medical School's Hall of Honor during its sesquicentennial celebration in 2000. Michael J. Franzblau, a medical doctor from San Francisco, argued that Wile's experiments placed defenseless patients in harm's way, thus violating the code of medical conduct then and now. "Is it reasonable, in view of this unethical experiment, even by 1916 standards, to honor Wile with a plaque and picture and a memorial lectureship in his name?" asked Franzblau in an open letter to his alma mater.

But the Medical School decided against removing Wile from their Hall of Honor, because in doing so they would also have to remove the name of the prominent eugenicist Victor Vaughan, not to mention dealing with the building that bears his name. In a letter sent to "Medicine at Michigan," the journal that published Franzblau's objections, U-M Dean Allen S. Lichter commended the alumnus for reminding them of this chapter of medical history but argued that safeguards on human subject research are quite different today than they were in the past. To judge earlier medical doctors by today's ethical standards would lead them to rename many of their buildings.

An old lawyer's memory

How murky the waters still were in the late 1950s, remembers Ron DeGraw. The 70-year-old attorney, who is a senior partner at a Marshall law firm, recalls one sterilization case at the beginning of his career.

On short notice, DeGraw was called to a Calhoun County Probate Court hearing in Marshall to investigate the case of two "feeble-minded" women who were supposed to be sterilized to prevent them from having "imbecile" children. Through cross-examination, DeGraw learned that both women had recently given birth. "Neither of the doctors [diagnosing their mental health] had ever seen the children, and so I asked how they could confer that the children would be imbeciles," DeGraw remembers.

The judge adjourned the case until more evidence was gathered. One month later, the doctors stated they had examined the 2-month old children and concluded that they were imbeciles. DeGraw questioned the validity of these tests and moved to dismiss the case. Unfortunately, the judge ruled to sterilize the women.

The young lawyer was so upset that he called Probate Judge Mary Coleman, who later was to become Michigan's first female chief justice, telling her he did not wish to ever again serve on a sterilization case. He recalls her saying, "I'm sorry you feel that way."

Reflecting on the incident, DeGraw says there had been no awareness among judges and physicians that they were doing something wrong. "The doctors had no qualms whatsoever about it. In fact, they were willing to testify that the children were idiots without even examining them. They were probably primarily interested in keeping the state budget balanced." He also believes that a lack of independent oversight exacerbated the problem. The doctors who testified against "feeble-minded" residents worked in institutions. "They worked for the system. In retrospect, what I should have done was to insist that they let me hire experts and come in and challenge [their evaluation]."

DeGraw doesn't believe the state of Michigan should apologize to the victims of sterilization policies. In this respect, he disagrees with his junior partner, Lisa McNiff, who represented Fred Aslin in his lawsuit against Michigan. "We all have closets we don't want to enter," DeGraw said. "I don't think an apology does anyone any good: They've changed the system. Isn't that apology enough?"

Should Michigan apologize?

Robert A. Sedler, a distinguished professor at Detroit's Wayne State University Law School, doesn't believe this is enough. Michigan should acknowledge the wrong that was done by the state while the victims are still alive, and should make reparations, he believes.

The law professor who advised his former student McNiff in her work on the Aslin lawsuit, argues that legislation should be enacted in line with Congress's 1988 decision to admit guilt for the forced relocation of Japanese-Americans during World War II was wrong, and to pay modest reparations. "You get some of the same issues with claims for reparations for slavery, with the only difference being that there are no slaves alive," he said.

Alexandra Minna Stern, an associate director at the U-M Center for the History of Medicine, believes the time is ripe for Michigan to issue an apology. Michigan is the only state with a high number of forced sterilizations that has not yet acknowledged wrongdoing.

Stern, who is completing a book on eugenic sterilization programs in the American West based on her dissertation research, thinks that an apology would have many advantages if thoughtfully applied. As a symbolic gesture it could provide emotional reconciliation for the victims. In 2002, after apologizing for the state's sterilization program, Virginia Gov. Mark R. Warner helped establish a roadside marker. The same year, Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber apologized in person to some of the 2,600 people sterilized in his state and created an annual Human Rights Day to commemorate the mistake. And North Carolina's governor created a panel to probe into the history of the program that sterilized 7,600 people in his state, interview survivors and consider the possibility of reparations.

Stern argues that an apology would force state agencies to look at their past, critically reflect on today's ethical standards and prevent such mistakes from being repeated.

The assistant professor of history testified before California's Senate Select Committee on Genetics, Genetic Technology and Public Policy in 2003, following the most recent apology of Gov. Gray Davis. Unlike Virginia and Oregon, where many survivors had been present, the California apology was issued from the halls of the state legislature, with no one to receive it, criticized Stern. "Hence, one of the things that became important for the select committee was to try to find some of the survivors to put a human face on the story."

The committee put out an all-points bulletin, to identify and contact survivors. As a result of increased media coverage, 10 victims of eugenic sterilization have recently come forward. The California committee has made Stern, who is originally from San Francisco, its official contact person. This summer, the U-M scholar will begin collaborating with the University of California's Regional Oral History Archive at Berkeley, interviewing the sterilization victims to make their oral histories part of the permanent record.

Martin S. Pernick, another U-M historian studying the U.S. eugenics movement, also supports the call for an apology. Pernick said that the apology would need to include a clear statement about who did what and what was wrong with these actions, and should incorporate a plan to prevent future wrongdoings. "A secondary function is memorializing the individual victims, as a form of psychological compensation." When asked about reparations, Pernick said it would be hard to imagine what one could offer someone "for a lost lifetime."

Pernick's 1996 book, "The Black Stork," focuses on a Chicago surgeon, Dr. Harry J. Haiselden, who in the late 1910s drew national attention for allowing the deaths of at least six infants diagnosed as "defectives." Following the controversy surrounding his practice, Haiselden went on to write and star in a film, "The Black Stork," promoting the eugenic desirability of withholding treatment from "defective" newborns.

Pernick, Stern and other historians warn that a simple written apology, without additional symbolic gestures, educational programs or financial compensation would be insufficient.

In a Dec. 23 essay in The New York Times, Howard Markel, a professor at the Center for the History of Medicine in Ann Arbor, warned. "Increasingly, public apologies have been made to smooth over these clinical transgressions. Yet the doctor in me wonders whether these gestures will cure what ails us."

Alice Domurat Dreger, an associate professor of science and technology studies at Michigan State University, has similar doubts. "Often when these apologies happen people do it with the assumption that nothing like it happens now, and nothing like it will happen in the future."

But Dreger believes that there is actually "a lot of eugenics-like stuff" going on now, such as pre-natal screening and genetic counseling. Michigan health care providers are required to offer pregnant women the so-called triple test, which is a simple blood test to examine whether there might be something genetically anomalous with their child, including Down syndrome.

When Dreger was pregnant herself, she turned down the triple test because she didn't believe that aborting a child with a disability was a good idea. "When an abortion happens, it needs to happen because the woman is not ready to have a child at all. The way to deal with disability is to provide social support for those who're coping with it," said Dreger. In her view an abortion as a result of pre-natal screening constitutes eugenics.

The use of sonograms is another good example of ambiguous technology, the MSU professor said. In some instances sonograms can be used to help prevent disability in a fetus, allowing physicians to strategize on how the pregnant mother should be treated and give birth, and enabling them to better prepare for treatment after birth. But often sonograms are also used to decide whether a child with a disability will be aborted. "So the idea that eugenics happened way back, and nothing like that is happening now, so we can afford to apologize, bothers me," said Dreger.

The End

When I called Fred Aslin at his home in Newberry and heard the intelligent and friendly voice of a now 77-year old man, I thought about the great injustice suffered by this man an his family. Aslin's father died of pneumonia during the Great Depression, after a fishing accident. The boys were caught trampling flower gardens, and the state stepped in to remove them from the home of an overwhelmed, young, widowed mother. Foster care homes didn't exist then, and poor children were frequently placed in orphanages or mental institutions.

They were diagnosed as having abnormal behavior, very low IQs, and as being "feeble-minded," all conditions linked to promiscuity, criminality and social dependency. In the case of the Aslin siblings, doctors at Lapeer apparently saw a threat in the children's potential to "pass for normal" and to reproduce with "normal" people. One of Aslin's sisters escaped. She is the only one who managed to have children.

Aslin told me about his paternal grandmother, a full-blooded Ottawa, who came to the Upper Peninsula from Canada. From this, our conversation evolved into a discussion about North Carolina's plan to investigate and compensate the remaining survivors of forced sterilization. Learning that I am originally from Germany, Aslin also spoke with me about the eugenics movement during National Socialism and seemed particularly interested in what went wrong between 1933 and 1945.

It had taken Aslin some 50 years to fully understand what went wrong in his own case. After being discharged from the Lapeer State Home, he was drafted and sent to Korea, where he was wounded outside Seoul. He lost one lung for a country that had labeled him "feeble-minded." When he recovered, he married a widow with two sons and raised them as his own. He worked as a machinist and lived with his family on a 125-acre farm in Homer, Mich..

Asked about his feeling towards the physicians, teachers and lawyers at the Lapeer State Home, Aslin said he had no personal feelings, one way or the other. He explained, simply: "We were poor. We were Indians. I'm sure that had quite a lot to do with that."

Aslin says he is still angry that Mackinac County Probate Judge David Murray, after splittingthe family up and sending the children to Lapeer in 1936, ordered the sterilization of his mother, Frances. He says that when he learned about this after researching his record in the 1990s, "that just about floored" him.

The Lapeer State Home □ with 1,060 employees once Lapeer's largest employer □ was closed in October 1992 and demolished in 1996. Thirteen cupolas, which once rested atop two brick dormitory buildings, were salvaged from the demolition and are today part of the city's new logo, and the centerpiece of the new gateways, leading to downtown.

Aslin's memory of the state home is much less nostalgic. He knows the home for what it really was, the place where children and adults labeled as "epileptic," "moronic," "mentally defective," and "feeble-minded" were housed. When asked why it took him 50 years to speak publicly about the injustice done to him and his family, Aslin said, "We were so ashamed of being in that mental institution, that we didn't want anybody to know about it. And we never talked about it. Not even amongst ourselves.

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