A Look At Continence Through The Eyes Of History

"What experience and history teach is this—that people and governments never have learned anything from history or acted on principles deduced from it."—Georg Wilhelm Hegel

"Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."—George Santayana

History, the study of all of our yesterdays... most of us think of historians as people who are interested in the past, scholars who document social movements as they are reflected in the arts or religion, or students of major human events such as wars. Few people are likely to give much consideration to history as it relates to continence and incontinence. Yet, the attitudes and norms surrounding incontinence in society today have their roots in man's history of continence behavior and human excrement disposal.

Tracing the history of the word "incontinence" through the ages is in itself fascinating. In a study of the earliest known occurrences of 80,000 English words, incontinence is listed as being used in literature as early as 1150. In their book Continence and Incontinence two British psychologists, Linda and Paul Smith, trace the word through time by examining folio editions of Samuel Johnson's Dictionary, first published in 1755. There the word was defined in terms of imbecility, lack of restraint of appetite, indulging in unlawful pleasure, or "unchaste".

Somewhere between 1930 and the 1970's the popular usage of the word changed according to the Smiths. Today, if people do recognize the word "incontinence", most folks now associate it with the loss of bowel and/or bladder control rather than with failure to restrain sexual appetite. A change in any word's accepted meaning in just a few short decades can result in some disastrous communications incidents as one speaker noted recently at a medical conference on incontinence. This doctor had asked an elderly patient if she had problems with incontinence. The doctor thought he was inquiring about the patient's bladder, not her sex life! "No" replied the puzzled patient, "I am a widow."

It is interesting to note that many modern dictionaries had not yet caught up with the change in usage. Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (1963) cites the first definition of incontinence as "failure to restrain sexual appetite" followed by "inability of the body to control the excretory functions." In 1971 Webster's Unabridged Dictionary definition reads: "lacks of restraint, inability or disinclination to resist desire or impulse; especially salaciousness, dissoluteness; (2) inability to retain bodily discharge (as urine) voluntarily."

One can't help but wonder what acceptance of incontinence in society would be if our forefathers had laid claim to a word for loss of bladder and bowel control which had not communicated mixed messages and was widely known outside of medical circles.

The history of waste removal and how our modern toilets came to be are also histories not often reflected upon by the average citizen. To prove the point: how many readers can answer this question quickly... when, where, and by whom was the flushing toilet first invented? (Answer: in 1596, in England, by Sir John Harrington—who was banished by his godmother Queen Elizabeth I to the army in Ireland for writing about his contraption).

Even the location of the washroom in many of the older buildings in Europe has an interesting history. For many continued inside
"Thanks for being there" said the young woman as she hung up the telephone. That statement represents one of the nicest rewards the Foundation staff receives as we climb the mountain of tasks each day. Eight years have raced past since the Simon Foundation for Continence was founded: "bring incontinence out of the closet, remove the stigma associated with it, and provide education for people who suffer from incontinence, their families, and the professionals who provide their care."

Today, the "praise" file we keep for morale boosting attests to the fact that we've indeed "been there" for thousands of people when they needed us. One letter read: "I was very sick when I first called upon you and thus had been out of work. You sent helpful information and your newsletter right out, and you kept it coming until I could afford to join the Foundation. I'm well and working again. Please use the enclosed $50 to help others in the same way." Another reader writes: "Thanks for insisting I see a doctor. He found cancer in my bladder, but it was at a very early stage, so I'm going to be cured. You and the doctor saved my life."

When people write to thank the staff and volunteers, they are also thanking you our faithful readers and members whose ideas, time, and financial support make it possible for us to do the work of the Foundation.

Together, we've already made an enormous difference by producing a volume of educational materials including films, books, and newsletters; supporting a toll-free telephone number so sufferers can receive information; giving speeches to thousands of health care professionals each year about patient needs . . . ALL of these efforts have been accomplished because of YOU.

Each of you should take pride in what we've accomplished together. But then, please take a moment to reflect on all that still needs doing and how you can contribute. In this issue, you will find our annual appeal for your help. We at the Simon Foundation for Continence believe we have your faithful support. Please prove us right. We can't do it without you.

---

Dear Informer:

You can count on my help. I know about the impact of incontinence in a person's life because:

☐ I have the problem
☐ Someone I love has the problem
☐ I am a health care professional caring for people with incontinence
☐ I am a professional working in industry, helping to provide people with better products and devices

Because of this experience I too am dedicated to the Simon Foundation for Continence's mission and want to do my part for continence:

☐ I am willing to help to begin a Simon Foundation "I WILL MANAGE" support group in my community, Please send me information.
☐ I am able to answer marketing research questionnaires whenever the Foundation has a need for volunteers. Please add my name to your research files.

☐ I am able to help with the work for continence by contributing financially.
☐ $1,000.00 Life Membership
☐ $15.00 Annual Membership
☐ $5,000.00 Corporate Sustaining Membership
☐ $100.00 Individual Sustaining Membership
☐ $5.00 Caring Membership
☐ $35.00 Professional Membership
☐ __________ other

☐ I care tremendously about the work for continence. Enclosed please find postage stamps so that the Foundation can continue to respond with information to the thousands of people each month who need our help.

☐ I want to join the Pen Pal Club and help others by sharing. Please publish my name in the Pen Pal column.

Mail to:
The Simon Foundation for Continence
P.O. Box 895
Wilmette, IL 60091

NAME: ____________________________________________

STREET ADDRESS: __________________________________

CITY, STATE, ZIP: _________________________________

*PLEASE NOTE: If you prefer to keep your Informer intact, feel free to send us a handwritten note or make a copy of this form.
History continued

years there existed a widely held belief that the major causes of death were due to bad air. This theory prevailed even after establishment of the connection between diseases such as cholera and typhoid and improper sewage disposal leading to contaminated water supplies. Thus “water closets” as the English call bathrooms, were built separate from main buildings, often reachable only after a long journey down lengthy corridors and through a set of double doors which banished the room with the “bad air” to the annexe. Perhaps this historical background helps explain why even today, the bathroom in most homes remains the smallest room in the house, often located upstairs inconveniently out of reach of the day-to-day living space.

Most people today take modern washrooms for granted unless they are traveling to some third world nations where they might be confronted with problems of sanitation. For most of humanity, the opportunity to not think about the disposal of human waste is a relatively recent phenomenon. In 1842, only 150 years ago, the economics of collecting “night soil” to truck to outlying farms for manure was a major issue of debate in London. Evidently the expense of removal and cartage was too high. Literature from that age shows that the use of cesspools was prevalent before water-born systems became available. Dickens and other authors describe the need for bricks to be placed in the street for residents to step upon in order to avoid the filth of overflowing privies.

Amazingly, given the state of sanitation in the 1800's, excavations at archeology digs have discovered crude drainage systems in sites considered to be 10,000 years old. Obviously, the technology was lost over time. But even with the advent (or should we say rediscovery) of flush toilets and water-born sewage systems, it took an entrepreneur conducting a vigorous crusade to bring the toilet out into the open so that public bathrooms could exist. This entrepreneur, George Jennings, describes that his ideas for what we call public toilets were originally: “declined by Gentlemen (influenced by English delicacy of feeling) who preferred that the Daughters and Wives of Englishmen should encounter every corner, sights so disgusting to every sense, and that the general public suffer pain and often permanent injury rather than permit the construction of that shelter and privacy…”

But Jennings ploughed ahead with his controversial plans, installing pay toilets in the Crystal Palace (London) for the Great Exhibit in 1851. Over 80,000 people paid for their use. In fact it may be to Jennings that history owes one of the first euphemisms for a trip to the bathroom. Although not often heard in the United States, the British expression for a trip to the washroom, “spending a penny,” comes directly from the Crystal Palace event.

Unfortunately, it was also Jennings who had the idea of locating public conveniences in discreet out-of-the-way places such as underground in town centers and at railway stations. Thus he set the precedent for making it difficult for older people and people with disabilities to use public restrooms.

This example, perhaps more than any other, demonstrates that looking back through history points the way in part to what is reality today. Although our forefathers left us with a legacy of questionable attitudes surrounding continence, there is a note of hope in this history: while it took Harrington two to three hundred years to make an impact with his toilet, it took Jennings twenty to thirty years to propagate the idea of public facilities. Perhaps the increased speed of social change indicates that now that so many people are working on continence, soon cultures can tolerate alleviation of the sense of embarrassment and taboos. After all, the world no longer crosses the streets by walking on bricks!

Simon Says continued

THE HOUSTON VERDICT IS IN . . .

Remember the legal secretary who was arrested last year when she circumvented the line to the ladies washroom by visiting the men’s room at a George Strait concert? Jurors, after deliberating 23 minutes, acquitted Denise Wells of violating a Houston city ordinance that prohibits people from using restrooms intended for members of the opposite sex in a manner calculated to cause a disturbance. The jurors felt that the state failed to prove that Wells had no permission to enter the men’s room and that she entered with the intent to “raise a ruckus.”

THOUGHTS FOR THE DAY . . . “What counts is not necessarily the size of the dog in the fight—it’s the size of the fight in the dog.” Dwight D. Eisenhower. “This is the true joy in life, being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish, selfish little clog of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.” George Bernard Shaw.
Letters To The Editor

Dear Dr. Primomo:
Your support of our statement that solving solid waste management issues goes beyond the diaper dilemma is appreciated. We hope that readers who wish to become educated consumers will follow your advice and take time to discover all the facts. Each of us has a share in the responsibility of shaping the world both today and for future generations.

Dear Informer:
Since you printed my letter in the Informer I have received a lot of correspondence! People shared information about themselves, their families, careers, and hobbies. Most also shared thoughts about their incontinence, how it affected their lives, and how they managed it. When they asked questions of me, usually they were about my problem, how I coped, and what products or devices I used. What amazed me the most was how little many of these people knew of what products were available to help them. People just picked a popular brand and stuck with it. One person told me that he used two diapers to sleep in, and unfortunately, the brand he mentioned was one that I knew to be very low in absorbency. Another mentioned that he had to wear cloth diapers when he would prefer disposables, because he could not afford their high cost. Then he mentioned the cost. I knew it to be about twice what he should pay. I feel I am a bit of an expert in this field as I have tried just about every adult diaper on the market in an effort to find the best one. I also know of several sources that sell directly to the consumer at very reasonable prices. If any reader would like this information, I would be happy to share it with them if they would write to me.

Craig Thompson
P.O. Box 405
Doctors Inlet, Fl. 32030

Dear Craig:
Thanks for your willingness to share with others... get prepared for more mail, because we know that the issues you are raising are important to many of our readers. Please don’t forget to remind people to see their doctor in order to: (1) find the reason for their incontinence, (2) explore what can be done about it, and (3) confirm that there are no unforeseen medical ramifications of the choice they are making to use absorbent products. Your informal survey suggests there are many things which others could do to help. Whenever possible, manufacturers and retailers could provide the opportunity to sample their products. Retailers could display the contents of packaging so that consumers did not have to purchase a whole box to discover whether or not the product met their needs. And, of course, knowledgeable pharmacists could make a terrific contribution by providing information to confused customers. Thanks for once again allowing us to point out a problem which continues to plague the incontinence marketplace.

Dear Informer:
Last night on ABC's 20/20 I watched with great interest the segment on incontinence, especially that portion which featured Ms. Garley, Simon's President. Perhaps the dream of public knowledge and acceptance of our problem is slowly coming true! As for myself, I made another trip to the doctor. After evaluating the results of previous tests and a further examination, it's been determined that my problem is neurological in nature and caused by other physical problems resulting from the polio I had as a child. My problem is worse than some, but better than many, so I guess I have a lot to be thankful for. I also recently overcame my biggest hurdle yet when I told my 7-year-old son about my problem. He listened intently, but I must have been obvious in my uneasiness because he ran to his bedroom and brought out his teddy bear to take care of me and make me feel better. What a kid! He accepted it all with no more concern than if I had a hangnail! Because of him, my ever-understanding wife, and naturally you and The Simon Foundation for Continence, I can take on the whole world now! I hope that you have room in a future issue of The Informer to add my name and address to your ever-growing list of pen pals. If I could help just one person feel better about themselves it would be worth it!

James K. Chase
851 Laura Street
Sun Prairie, Wisconsin 53590

Dear Jim:
Hearing from you over the years and observing the transition you've made in order to be ready to "take on the world" has been beautiful and a joy to witness. Your recent experience with your son reinforces what this editor has always believed: children are taught their attitudes about body functions. If our society would teach them that "Urine Is Beautiful" because it allows the body to cleanse itself, then improvements in society's attitudes about continence would surely follow. I'm sure you will help more than one person to gain better self-esteem.