

Hysteria and the Vibrator

During the Victorian Era, female hysteria was a favored diagnosis by physicians for a litany of symptoms. During the late 19th century, women were regarded as frail, flighty creatures, subject to strange and mysterious mental and emotional afflictions. Symptoms of this dread disease included sadness, anxiety, crying, anger, lack of energy, surliness, impertinence, or basically any behavior that a Victorian-era husband found unpleasant or improper in his wife.



The concept of hysteria and its treatments can be traced back to Ancient Greece. Galen, the famed physician of the 2nd century, noted that deprivation of "release" among healthy women brought on female hysteria, and that pelvic massage provided beneficial results. "Arising from the touch of the genital organs required by the treatment, there follows twitchings accompanied at the same time by pain and pleasure...from that time she is free of all the evil she felt," wrote Galen.



For centuries, "female relaxation" through therapeutic pelvic massage was performed by doctors and mid-wives with no understanding that what the female patient might be experiencing was an orgasm. In fact, there was little or no accepted belief that women could feel sexual pleasure at all.

Achieving a release, or "paroxysm," by hand was a time-consuming process for doctors. As historian Dr. Rachel Maines describes in "The Technology of Orgasm: 'Hysteria,' the Vibrator, and

Women's Sexual Satisfaction," the vibrator was developed to perfect and automate a function that doctors had long performed for their female patients. At first, there were hydrotherapeutic models that dispensed huge jets of water aimed toward the patient. These were guaranteed by their manufacturers to offer "all of the therapeutic benefits of a manual pelvic massage in a fraction of the time."

The advent of electricity changed all that. The first electric vibrator was patented in 1883 as a medical device by British doctor Joseph Mortimer Granville. Originally called a percusser, or more colloquially "Granville's hammer," the machine was sold to physicians as a device to relieve mundane muscle aches. As it became increasingly popular as a treatment for hysteria, its inventor disassociated himself from the device's "mis-use."

Victorian medicine included a range of peculiar treatments such as "Goetze's device for producing dimples" and "Merrell's strengthening cordial, liver invigorator and purifier of the blood." But the debut of the electro-mechanical vibrator was a medical event that truly worked wonders—safely, reliably and repeatedly.

Manufactured with interchangeable attachments known as "vibratodes" that helped deliver vibrations at the rate of 1,000-7,000 pulses a minute, these remarkable cure-all machines were administered by reputable doctors. They looked much like an electric hand drill or cake mixer. There were many variations including the "Carpenter Vibrator" which hung from the ceiling and the pedal-driven "Chattanooga Vibrator," which was operated by pedal like a sewing machine.



By the late 1890s, women began taking this matter into their own hands. Electric vibrators became desirable consumer commodities, within the economic reach of ordinary households. In 1902, Hamilton Beach patented the first electric vibrator available for retail sale, making the vibrator the fifth domestic appliance to be electrified, after the sewing machine, fan, and toaster, and about a decade before the vacuum cleaner and iron. Major

retailers like Sears & Roebuck offered vibrators in their catalogs and advertisements were common in women's magazines, always marketed as therapeutic aids with no mention of any sexually stimulating properties.



In 1921, *Hearst* magazine published the first vibrator advertisement aimed at men. It encouraged them to buy vibrators for their wives to keep them "young and pretty and free from the scourge of hysteria."

But by the end of that decade, women were gaining new freedom of expression

complete with voting rights and opportunities to work. Freud's theories revolutionized the public's understanding of female sexuality, and doctors no longer believed that hysteria was a medical condition worthy of treatment. By the 1930s, vibrators—now produced with a phallic shape—were relegated to use in underground stag films and became stigmatized, associated with sex and immorality. They were largely unseen and discussed for decades, sold only through discreet mail-order outlets until the sexual revolution of the late 1960s.

Only recently has this unique chapter of social, medical, and sexual history been reopened and reexamined. Sarah Ruhl's play invites us to look through a feminist lens at the peculiar and largely forgotten phenomenon known as hysteria and to be amused by the inventive, innocent, and "not altogether unpleasant" treatments it once inspired.