

Ruth Skrine, Fertility and Sexuality in the 20th century: snapshots from the life of a medical woman

**Synopsis of talk delivered at the West of England and South Wales Women's History Network Autumn Study Day, Saturday 15 November 2014
"Writing women's lives: Historians and Autobiography"**

This talk was based on two recently published books. The first, *Carry on Coping* (pub 2013) is the edited diary of Dr J F Hickson covering the years 1942-1945. It is a contemporary account of her life as a wife, mother and doctor. She was married to a GP working in Chippenham, Wiltshire, who specialised in obstetrics.

The second book *Growing into Medicine: the life and loves of a psychosexual doctor* (pub 2014) is a retrospective memoir by her daughter, Ruth Skrine. The talk used selective passages from both books to give a flavour of the way greater access to family planning services and the greater choice of contraceptive methods has effected women's lives, with particular emphasis on the need for professionals to help couples choose a method they can use successfully. The development of services for the young, including the establishment of the 408 centre in Sheffield and the network of Brook clinics was mentioned.

Reference was made to the book *Sex on the Rates* by Libby Wilson, published in 2004, which provides a vivid account of the struggle to get contraception accepted in society. The most recent book, an amalgam of the author's personal and professional lives, deals with the fight to get the subject recognised by the medical profession, and to explain what is meant by psychosexual medicine. The discipline grew out of the skills needed in the contraceptive consultation and consists, not just of listening to what patients say, but to messages from the body and to the atmosphere in the room. Psychosexual medicine is not sexual therapy or sexual counselling but a specific way of working to try and help patients who choose to take their sexual difficulties to doctors. The licence, indeed the duty for the doctor to make a physical examine on many occasions provides special opportunities and limitations.

The importance of the abortion act of 1967 was illustrated by reference to a 15yr old girl who had a baby down the loo in 1943 and to a woman in her thirties who died in 1956 following a back-street abortion. The talk ended with an extract giving the author's assessment of the effect these changes have had for women of today.