

## **Unit 7: Megan Davies: What were conditions like in asylums? / Where did the concept of eugenics originate? When was it most widespread? When did it dissipate?**

**Q:** What were conditions like in asylums?

**A:** So conditions in asylums were, I think, mixed. In some places, they did indeed give people a refuge and the notion of work therapy because institutions were primarily-- the machinery of the institution was primarily provided by patients. Patients did the laundry. Patients did the cooking. Patients grew the vegetables. Patients did the gardening. And that was all considered part of their therapy. And for some people in emotional stress, that might've actually been not like a reasonable life. But there were many, many things that I think that happened in institutions that would horrify us today and would greatly upset us if we thought that someone we cared about was being subject to those kinds of treatments: solitary confinement, incredible overcrowding, particularly by the 1950's when institutional populations in the mental health world were at their peak in Canada. Treatment that we would consider brutal and senseless today, things like lobotomies were practiced in certain parts of Canada, sterilization, sexual sterilization of men and of women was not uncommon in institutional populations and, in fact, it was the law in Alberta and British Columbia for a big chunk of the 20th century, even if it wasn't on the law books in other parts of Canada, it was practiced amongst institutionalized populations. So there's a lot of pieces of that picture of the madhouse which was in direct opposition to the concept of human rights as we know it today. And there were many, many things that happened in those institutions, which I think that we should be very ashamed of as a society.

**Q2:** Where did the concept of eugenics originate? When was it most widespread? When did it dissipate?

**A:** The notion of eugenics, the conceptualization that there are hereditary traits that mark who you are, your intelligence, your mental capacity and your physical strength was the brainchild of Francis Galton, who was a cousin of Darwin, Charles Darwin. And so it was a 19th century idea that percolated in Britain and started by the early 20th century to find expression in public policy in Britain and then in many other parts of the world, including Canada. In Canada, two provinces, Alberta and British Columbia, had sexual sterilization of people deemed mentally unfit on the books by the 1920's. I

can't remember when it was. Okay. Sorry. By the 1920's, and these laws in B.C. and Alberta, to make it clear, were not repealed until the 1970's. So Alberta-- we have the greatest evidence from Alberta. But perhaps I'll tell you the story of one victim of eugenicist policies in Alberta, a woman called Doreen Befus, who was born in Medicine Hat, Alberta in the 1920's. And her early life was shaped by, I think, three pertinent factors. She was born a twin, and she was quite sickly as a baby. And she was born into an impoverished and unstable family. Her parents separated when she was very young, but I think the third thing that's quite pertinent is she was born with an extra toe on each foot. And although that toe was surgically removed at a young age, I think it marked her as different. And her uncertain health marked her as vulnerable, as did her fragmented family life and the working class origins of her family. So she was taken as a ward of the state and institutionalized at what was later called the Michener Institution in Red Deer, Alberta. And when she was a teenager, she was sexually sterilized. She probably was not told what was happening to her. It happened to most of the children, the adolescents at the Michener, and it was never explained to them or they never gave their consent. Their parents never gave their consent if they had parents. Why? Because they had changed the law so that was not necessary. And in the 1970's, Doreen came out of the institution and lived out her life in the community and became an activist and a writer. But she's an illustration, in that sense, she's an unusual illustration of someone who was the victim of eugenicist policies and practices in that she became an activist and a writer. But if you read her writing, it's so clear that the assessment of her intellectual capabilities was just total bullshit. And the story of Doreen, it brings out a real sense of profound injustice, but also just like this, it's a very sad story and it's very inspiring to think that she managed to do everything she did in her life with-- being treated in such an unjust way. So eugenics policies were profoundly destructive for the individuals whose lives they impinged upon.