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“I am afraid you have yourself to blame”: Psychology, gynaecology and the deferment of blame in mid-twentieth century Australian medicine

Mid-twentieth century Australia was a period of knowledge development and transmission about previously unknown or idiopathic gynaecological conditions, such as pregnancy loss and menstrual dysfunction. Hormones and blood incompatibilities were both legitimate explanations for these various conditions, but they operated alongside alternative frameworks of body knowledge. In cases of miscarriage and menstrual dysfunction, psychology was regularly invoked to not only explain idiopathic or unknown causes for these dysfunctions but also to reorganise responsibility away from the medical practitioner and towards the patient. Successful completion of pregnancy was due to medical supervision whilst miscarriage, or even threatened miscarriage, the result of the behaviour, diet or psychology of the woman. Pregnancy loss was medicalised in the mid-twentieth century with women held individually responsible for their loss. Similarly, menstrual irregularities were not simply related to the bodily systems which regulated the menstrual cycle, the endocrine system, but also to the patient's embodiment of their womanhood, with women's behaviour and psychology considered to impact the presence or absence of menstruation. This paper will argue that in both instances the evocation of psychology formed a particular function; to defer the blame of the irregularity away from the doctor and towards the woman.