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Abortion Stories: the value of historical stories hidden in the archives

In recent years there has been an increase in personal abortion stories in the public domain. This includes edited collections, podcasts, and personal essays and memoir. There have also been a number of studies that have shown that personal stories can change a person's opinion of abortion and reduce the shame and stigma that is associated with abortion. But, what of historic stories? What can stories from the past reveal about not only the experience of women but the circumstances in which they found themselves? Previous research into the history of abortion have used crime records and newspaper articles to show the experience of women with abortion. Using the same sources, I aim to understand the legal process within the medical and social context of the time. For my PhD I will undertake a comparative analysis of the practice of abortion laws in all states and territories in Australia between 1860 to 1960. Specific examples will be presented as microhistories to contextualise the legal, social and medical circumstances at the time. This paper will discuss the collections of abortion stories, the impact of these stories, and how I am using microhistories to reveal historical abortion stories. Historical stories can show the external forces that effected the practice of the law. This understanding of the judicial process can help to paint a broader picture of society at the time. A comparative analysis of each state and territory is necessary as the law was different in each jurisdiction. This comparison will help to identify the inter-relationship between the changes in society, and the changes in legal and medical understanding over time.