Bad Blood: Diabetes and the Legacy of the Eugenics Movement

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As the eugenics movement went on, diabetes became seen as a treatable medical problem and not a social problem like criminals, poor people, people with intellectual disabilities, and people of color.

Eugenics after the Second World War lost the previous baggage of scientific racism but carried the same intrinsic risk as old eugenics of a social movement targeting race, class, and intellectual disability as social problems.
Type 1 Diabetes

- Autoimmune reaction
- Typically diagnosed in childhood
- No production of insulin in the pancreas
- Critically dependent on insulin injections

Type 2 Diabetes

- Typically diagnosed in adults over age 40
- Insensitivity to insulin produced in the pancreas
- Treated successfully with diet, exercise, oral medications, and insulin injections
HISTORIES OF DIABETES HAVE IGNORED THE EUGENICS MOVEMENT

HISTORIES OF EUGENICS HAVE IGNORED DIABETES, DISABILITY, AND CHRONIC ILLNESS.

WHILE DISABILITY HAS HAD A MORE VISIBLE ROLE IN POST-WORLD WAR II THOUGHT, THIS PAPER WILL FOCUS ON DIABETES SPECIFICALLY.
Eugenics Before Insulin: 1910-1921

- Eugenicists used diabetes as a problem that could be solved
- Diabetics could not yet reproduce due to the young death rate

Teddy Ryder, treated with a starvation diet
Eugenics and Insulin: 1921-1930

- Diabetes as transformed by managerial medicine
- “Curing this generation does not make the next generation any stronger.”

Teddy Ryder, 1 year after starting insulin
Eugenicists’ Shifting Concern: 1930-1940

- Diabetes seen as a medical problem
- Race, poverty, crime, and intellectual disability as social problems

“Since these conditions present a medical problem rather than a social problem, it is unlikely that society would wish to attempt their control through reproduction.”

J.B. Collip, one of the inventors of insulin, circa 1927
The Beginnings of Medical Genetics: 1940-1960

- Diabetes becomes more medicalized with the treatment options available through Dr. Priscilla White
- Eugenics is shepherded into medical genetics
Growing distance from previous focus on social problems and control

A focus on the prevention of disease and disability included diabetes.
Genetic Technology and New Eugenics: 1980-2020

- Liberal eugenics: eliminate disease using genetic technology
- Neo-eugenicists: eliminate all social problems using genetic technology
- With the eugenic past of medical genetics, it’s important to remember the role of social prejudice in perceptions of disability
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