

Vibrators had a long history as medical quackery before feminists rebranded them as sex toys

June 8 2020, by Kim Adams

In the contemporary moment of [sex-positive feminism](#), praises for the orgasmic capacity of the vibrator abound. "They're all-encompassing, a blanket of electricity, that'll course through your veins, producing orgasms you didn't know you were physically capable of having," wrote Erica Moen in her web comic "[Oh Joy Sex Toy](#)." Vibrators today go hand in hand with masturbation and female sexuality.

Yet for American housewives in the 1930s, the [vibrator](#) looked like any other household appliance: a nonsexual new electric technology that could run on the same universal motor as their kitchen mixers and vacuum cleaners. Before small motors became cheap to produce, manufacturers sold a single motor base with separate attachments for a range of household activities, from sanding wood to drying hair, or healing the body with electrical vibrations.

[In my research](#) on the medical history of electricity, vibrators appear alongside galvanic battery belts and quack electrotherapies as one of many quirky home cures of the early 20th century.

Vibrating for health

The first electro-mechanical vibrator was a device called a "percuteur" [invented by British physician Joseph Mortimer Granville](#) in the late 1870s or early 1880s. Granville thought that vibration powered the

human nervous system, and he developed the percuteur as a [medical device](#) for stimulating ailing nerves.

Current medical opinion held that hysteria was a nervous disease, yet [Granville refused to treat female patients](#), "simply because I do not want to be hoodwinked... by the vagaries of the hysterical state." The vibrator began as a therapy for men only. It then quickly left the sphere of mainstream medical practice.

By the early 20th century, manufacturers were selling vibrators as ordinary electric household appliances. The merits of electricity in the home were not as obvious then as they are today: Electricity was dangerous and expensive, but it promised [excitement and modernity](#). Electric commodities, like sewing and washing machines, became the hallmarks of the rising middle class.

Vibrators were another shiny new technology, used to sell consumers on the prospect of modern electric living. Just as banks handed out free toasters for opening checking accounts in the 1960s, in the 1940s the [Rural Electrification Administration distributed free vibrators](#) to encourage farmers to electrify their homes. These modern electric devices were not thought of as sex toys.

Vibrating snake oil

In what may sound surprising to 21st-century readers, these appliances promised relief of a nonsexual variety. Users of all ages vibrated just about every body part, without sexual intent.

Vibrators made housework easier by soothing the pains of tired housewives, calming the cries of sick children and invigorating the bodies of modern working men. They were applied to tired backs and sore feet, but also the throat, to cure laryngitis; the nose, to relieve sinus

pressure; and everything in between. Vibration promised to calm the stomachs of colicky babies, and to stimulate hair growth in balding men. It was even thought to help heal broken bones.

A 1910 advertisement in the New York Tribune declared that "Vibration Banishes Disease As the Sun Banishes Mist." In 1912, the Hamilton Beach "New-Life" vibrator came with a 300-page instructional guide titled "[Health and How to Get It](#)," offering a cure for everything from obesity and appendicitis to tuberculosis and vertigo.

As such advertisements suggest, vibrators were not standard medical treatments, but medical quackery, alternative medicine that didn't deliver on their promises. Yet the electrical cure-alls [sold by the millions](#).

The classic form of medical quackery in the U.S. market was patent medicine—basically useless concoctions made mainly of alcohol and morphine, sometimes containing downright damaging ingredients like lead and arsenic. After the passage of the [Pure Food and Drug Act in 1906](#), the federal government began regulating the sale of patent medicines.

Vibrators and other electrotherapies were not covered by the new law, so they took up the market share of older medical concoctions. The White Cross Vibrator replaced Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup as a popular home cure rejected by the medical establishment.

In 1915, the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#) wrote that the "[vibrator business is a delusion and a snare](#). If it has any effect it is psychology." The business was dangerous not because it was obscene, but because it was bad medicine. The potential, acknowledged by doctors, for the vibrator to be used in masturbation was just further evidence of its quackery.

A cure for masturbatory illness

Sex toy scholar Hallie Lieberman points out that nearly every vibrator company in the early 20th century offered phallic attachments that "would have been [considered obscene if sold as dildos](#)." Presented instead as rectal or vaginal dilators, these devices were supposed to cure hemorrhoids, constipation, vaginitis, cervicitis and other illnesses localized to the genitals and the anus. Hamilton Beach, for example, offered a "[special rectal applicator](#)" for "an additional cost of \$1.50," and recommended its use in the treatment of "Impotence," "Piles—Hemorrhoids" and "Rectal Diseases."

The two most prominent scholars of vibrator history, [Rachel Maines](#) and [Hallie Lieberman](#), argue that vibrators were always secretly sexual, but I disagree. Vibrators were popular medical devices. One of many medical uses of the vibrator was to cure diseases of sexual dysfunction. And this use was a selling point, not a secret, during an era of anti-masturbatory rhetoric.

Special vibrator attachments like the rectal applicator offered dubious treatments for dubious diseases: remedies for ailments purportedly caused by "[ruinous and prevalent masturbation](#)."

Masturbation was thought to cause diseases like impotence in men and hysteria in women. Masturbatory illness was a pretty standard idea in the early 20th century. One of its surviving formulations is the idea that masturbating will make you go blind.

There's no way to really know how people were using vibrators. But the evidence suggests that they signified medical treatment, not sinful masturbation, regardless of the use. Even if users were doing physical actions that people today think of as masturbation, they didn't understand themselves to be masturbating, and therefore they weren't

masturbating.

Rethinking the vibrator's history

For most of the 20th century, vibrators remained innocuous quackery. Good Housekeeping even bestowed its [seal of approval on some models in the 1950s](#). When the sexual revolution hit America in the 1960s, vibrators were largely forgotten, outdated appliances.

In the 1970s radical feminists transformed the vibrator from a relic of bygone domesticity to a tool of female sexual liberation. At Betty Dodson's [bodysex workshops](#), electric vibrations changed "feelings of guilt about masturbation to feelings of celebration so that [masturbation became an act of self-love](#)." She and her sisters embraced vibrators as a political technology that could convert frigid anorgasmic housewives into powerful sexual beings capable both of having multiple orgasms and destroying the patriarchy.

This masturbatory revolt erased the vibrator's fading reputation as a cure for masturbatory illness and replaced it with a specific, powerful, public and lasting linkage between the vibrator and female masturbatory practice.

More information: Carisa R. Showden. *Feminist Sex Wars*, *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Gender and Sexuality Studies* (2016). [DOI: 10.1002/9781118663219.wbegss434](#)

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