

Evaluation of *Contraception*: *Uncovering the collection of Dame Margaret Sparrow*

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the context, development and evaluation of *Contraception: Uncovering the collection of Dame Margaret Sparrow*, an exhibition at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) in 2015–16.

Collections and exhibitions of contraceptive material are rare in New Zealand museums. In the case of Te Papa, strategic acquisitions since 2004 have enabled the display of contraceptive objects, culminating in the stand-alone exhibition *Contraception*, based on Dame Margaret's extensive collection.

To guide the exhibition's development, formative evaluation was conducted by members of the exhibition team, including the curator/author. Having exhibition staff talk directly to visitors enabled immediate understanding of our audiences, and ensured that staff could confidently champion the findings at a senior approval level and feed the results directly into the exhibition's development. Summative evaluation followed in order to understand the impacts of the exhibition.

The paper details the mechanics and findings of both evaluations, and the exhibition's successes. It also acknowledges that curatorial assumptions regarding visitors' perceptions of the exhibition were largely counteracted by the results.

KEYWORDS: Contraception exhibition, birth control, Margaret Sparrow, visitor research, formative evaluation, summative evaluation, contraceptive objects, sex and sexuality education.

Introduction

Contraception: Uncovering the collection of Dame Margaret Sparrow was an exhibition at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) in 2015–16.¹ It was the first time a substantial stand-alone exhibition had been devoted to the subject of contraception in a New Zealand museum, and it was well received by visitors, the media, historians and the museum profession.²

Dame Margaret Sparrow (b. 1935) is one of New Zealand's leading sexual-health doctors and birth-control advocates. In the 1960s and 1970s, she pioneered contraception and abortion services for students, and vasectomies for men. She was one of the first doctors to prescribe the emergency contraceptive pill in New Zealand, and has long been an outspoken advocate of abortion law

reform. In 2002, she was made a Distinguished Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit (later Dame Companion) for services to medicine and the community. Te Papa's exhibition honoured Dame Margaret's contributions and presented a history of contraception in a New Zealand context, based on her extensive collection of contraceptive devices gifted to Te Papa in 2011.

The exhibition's development was guided by the findings of formative evaluation conducted by members of the exhibition team, including the author/curator. This approach enabled a first-hand transformative experience in terms of understanding the complexity of our visitors, and in realising the power of data in terms of institutional approval and concept development.

The formative evaluation was valuable for showing that visitors favoured an approach based on liberation and

freedom, with Dame Margaret Sparrow's story integrated into the exhibition. The majority of interviewees favoured a serious tone to the exhibition, and the majority indicated they would participate in writing comments within the exhibition.

The cycle of evaluation was completed by conducting summative interviews in order to understand the impacts of the exhibition, and by analysing the visitor comments. The findings revealed that most visitors did not know about the exhibition beforehand, but were highly satisfied once they had visited. The exhibition generally did not change people's thinking about contraception, but a third of interviewees learned more than they already knew. Most interviewees singled out the objects as being the most memorable elements of the exhibition, and most indicated that they would like to see similar exhibitions at Te Papa in the future. The majority of the comments written by visitors demonstrated constructive engagement with the exhibition's topics.

These findings largely counteracted curatorial assumptions during the project that visitors would have heard about the exhibition beforehand and made a purposeful visit. The exhibition team also assumed that people would be surprised, impressed or shocked by the exhibition, but most interviewees were familiar with the objects and content. In addition, the team assumed that visitors would find the small, humble objects inconsequential, but in fact the objects were identified as the most memorable parts of the exhibition. One curatorial assumption that was upheld was that most visitors agreed that such exhibitions are important.

That said, contraception objects are rare in most museum collections and exhibitions. This may be due to the legacies of historical attitudes, laws and social mores, which may have led museums to avoid or demote the material culture of sexuality and birth control until the late twentieth century (Brookes et al. 2013: 210; Frost 2013: 16; Tyburczy 2016: 101). Te Papa itself began to collect contraceptive devices strategically only in 2004.

Audience research on exhibitions about contraception is even rarer. Critique and reviews on museum exhibitions about sex, sexuality and/or contraception can be found (e.g. Simon 2005; Berger 2010; Frost 2013; Gosselin 2014, 2015; Wannan 2015; Tyburczy 2016; Gibson 2017), but there is a paucity of visitor research studies on exhibitions that focus on contraception.³ This paper considers the field and contributes a case study in order to demonstrate that such exhibitions can be successful and relevant to museum audiences.

Collections and exhibitions featuring contraception

For those working and writing in the fields of family planning and sexual health, displays of contraceptive material will be familiar, from educational displays to curious devices of the past (e.g. Smyth 2000: 26–27). In 1925, pioneering birth-control advocate Marie Stopes displayed a curio cabinet of contraceptive devices in her Mothers' Clinic in central London. She called it the 'First and Only Museum of Contraception' (Cohen 1993: 99). A descendant of this can be found today in Family Planning New Zealand's head office in Wellington, where a cabinet of about 250 contraceptive devices donated by Dame Margaret Sparrow can be viewed by appointment. This semi-public display is generally seen only by family planning staff and their visitors.

However, a search for publicly accessible museum exhibitions devoted to contraception and associated visitor research yields few examples. Notable exceptions include the Museum of Contraception and Abortion in Vienna, Austria, which appears to be the only museum permanently dedicated to the subject, and which was considered groundbreaking when it opened in 2007.

In 1995, the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, Australia, developed a significant exhibition, *Taking Precautions: The Story of Contraception*, from its comprehensive contraceptive collection, which then toured the country. More recently, in 2015–16, the museum displayed 190 contraceptive objects within the exhibition *Recollect: Health and medicine*.⁴

Displays on contraception can be found within museums dedicated to medicine and health. A significant example is the permanent exhibition *Virtue, Vice, and Contraband: A history of contraception in America*, which opened in 2009 in the Dittrick Medical History Center at Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland (Berger 2010).⁵

Some museums have included contraception within wider contexts, such as science and technology. For example, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, DC, displayed 'Better than nature: the pill' as part of the exhibition *Science in American Life* (1994–2011). An assessment of the exhibition found that the majority of visitors had strongly positive views on science, which were reinforced by the exhibition (Pekarik et al. 1995).

Two British exhibitions about sex and sexuality that included historical contraceptive material and featured

visitor feedback systems were *Institute of Sexology* at the Wellcome Collection, London, in 2014–15, and *Intimate Worlds: Exploring Sexuality through the Sir Henry Wellcome Collection* at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, in 2014. Initial analysis suggests that visitors welcomed the opportunity to think through, and express, a wide range of ideas about sex (Jen Grove, pers. comm., 15 January 2018). Young people in particular found educational value in the objects displayed in *Intimate Worlds* (Fisher *et al.* 2017: 45).

The Canadian exhibition *Sex Talk in the City*, held at the Museum of Vancouver in 2013, featured a range of contraceptive material, some of it borrowed from the Dittrick Medical History Center. A key idea of the exhibition was that sexuality shapes people, objects and cities (Gosselin 2014: 108). Visitor research was conducted to examine how visitors responded to the exhibition and to evaluate its exhibition. Results included a high level of satisfaction and an appreciation of the role the museum took in creating a ‘safe place’ to talk about sexuality (Gosselin 2014: 113).

In New Zealand museums, displays of contraceptive devices and associated visitor research are rare. Apart from a long-term display of condoms at the National Army Museum in Waiouru (in the context of venereal disease during the First and Second World Wars), such displays are generally short term. For example, Dame Margaret Sparrow and her collection were profiled in ‘The reference collection’ in *To Have and To Hold: Making Collections* at Objectspace, Auckland (2009), which aimed to demonstrate that collectors are practitioners, working alongside artists, craftspeople, curators and writers (Clarke 2009: 5). Dame Margaret and her collection were again profiled in ‘*Doctor to dame*’ in *Tē Upoko o te Ika a Māui*, Wellington Museum (2013–14), an exhibition that profiled unexpected, unusual and unique stories from the wider Wellington region. Staff observed that young adults were ‘especially interested in the “Doctor to dame” story and several expressed surprise that contraception was discussed as a topic in a museum’ (Paul Thompson, Wellington Museums Trust, pers. comm., 8 January 2018).

Te Papa has twice positioned small displays of contraceptive devices within larger social history exhibitions exploring particular periods of time: ‘The liberating pill?’ in *Out on the Street: New Zealand in the 1970s* (2004–05); and ‘Women’s work: contraceptive revolution’ in *Slice of Heaven: 20th century Aotearoa* (2010–17). A summative evaluation of *Slice of Heaven* found that the ‘Women’s work’ objects were popular with visitors (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2011: 46–47).

Contraceptive collections can also be found in two of New Zealand’s medical museums (viewable by appointment). The Medical Museum in Palmerston North holds several objects (also gifted by Dame Margaret Sparrow), and the Cotter Medical History Museum in Christchurch holds a small collection of intrauterine devices.

In general, however, most New Zealand museums hold very little contraceptive material in their collections. A collection survey found that most institutions held only one to three contraceptive devices and/or related birth-control ephemera, although this does not account for contraceptive objects that museums might not know about in their collections.⁶ As Stuart Frost notes, ‘historically, museums have found sexuality difficult to address’ (2013: 16). Objects relating to sex were either not collected or lay unregistered in storage, or were catalogued without sexual or contraceptive references. For example, museum collections may hold douches, but because of their multiple uses, they are not generally catalogued as contraceptive objects.⁷ Indeed, as observed by Jennifer Tyburczy, the ‘raw materials’ for displaying sexual histories ‘lie dormant in museum archives’, therefore ultimately ‘any museum can be a sex museum’ (2016: 207).

Te Papa began to collect contraceptive material strategically only in 2004, when a large social history collection was acquired from Wellington woman Joyce Megget that included family planning literature, barrier methods and contraceptive pills. This was followed by Dame Margaret Sparrow’s gift of the majority of her collection to Te Papa in 2011 (more than 750 objects). Her collection was acquired because it related to significant events in New Zealand’s history (e.g. the introduction of the oral contraceptive pill in 1961), and it reflected the life and achievements of an iconic New Zealander while also highlighting aspects of everyday life (e.g. family planning) (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2010). Since then, Te Papa has proactively collected contemporary contraceptive technologies and filled in significant gaps (e.g. vasectomy instruments). These objects are permanently accessible at Te Papa’s Collections Online.⁸

These acquisitions have enabled Te Papa to create the displays mentioned above, as well as supporting external loan requests. The lack of representation of contraception in New Zealand museums was not a factor in the development of the Te Papa *Contraception* exhibition, but its rarity did make it stand out, as partly evidenced by its selection for the 2016 New Zealand Museum Awards.

Development of Dame Margaret Sparrow's collection and exhibition

Dame Margaret Sparrow assiduously collected contraceptive material culture throughout her career. Initially, she inherited objects from a previous director of Wellington Family Planning Clinic, transforming this into a reference collection that could both illustrate the story of family planning in New Zealand and be handled by trainee doctors and nurses (Clarke 2009: 37). Dame Margaret recalled:

the bulk of it arose through my teaching and training because I did a lot of work with our own staff, but also providing courses for nurses, and was involved in medical student training, and there it was helpful to have the history of contraception as well. And it just sort of accumulated and then people were aware I was interested in objects and they would send me things as well – that's how it grew. (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2013)

When the majority of Dame Margaret's collection came into Te Papa, curatorial staff immediately saw the potential to broaden its access beyond the health and education sectors. When an opportunity arose, history curators (including the author) pitched exhibition ideas about Dame Margaret and her collection to the museum's leadership and programming teams. Part of our pitch was the connection between a small gallery within Te Papa called the Ilott Room, and the John Ilott Charitable Trust, which had supported the gallery in the past. One of the trust's missions is to support projects advancing sexual education. This particular mission had not informed museum projects before, but it contributed to senior management's decision to develop an exhibition on contraception. The decision was also based on the significance of the collection, the importance of the topic, and the stature of Dame Margaret Sparrow in New Zealand.

The exhibition team then determined the following key messages for the exhibition:

- 1 Contraception is one of the most important inventions in world history, enabling the human race to control fertility and separate sex from reproduction.
- 2 Dame Margaret Sparrow is one of New Zealand's leading specialists and advocates on birth control and sexual health.
- 3 Dame Margaret's life, career and collection of contraceptive material cover a period of profound changes in society and technology, including the sexual revolution (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2015a).

The exhibition did not have an educational remit beyond these key messages, partly due to sexuality education being a narrow part of New Zealand's school curriculum. That said, the collection provides great potential for historical study, both at secondary and tertiary levels, and for sex and sexuality education within the ambit of Te Papa's vision to 'be a safe place for challenging conversations' (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2017: 11).⁹

Formative evaluation

The exhibition team decided to test the following ideas with visitors prior to further development:

- 1 Approach: whether to focus on Dame Margaret Sparrow, the science of contraception or women's liberation.
- 2 Tone test: either serious or less serious.
- 3 Visitors' likelihood to participate in writing comments within the exhibition.
- 4 General themes that would interest visitors.


We conducted the evaluation in the main foyer of Te Papa in late January 2015. Twenty visitors participated over two days. They were solicited as they passed through the foyer without initially being told about the content of the proposed exhibition. Each interview took 10–20 minutes.

Results

'positive messaging; personally interested and what [is] happening now.'; 'with subject matter, it [serious tone] sits better. Don't make light of it.'¹⁰

To determine the approach of the exhibition, the team created show cards for each of the three possible approaches: 'Dame Margaret Sparrow', 'Science of contraception' and 'Women's liberation' (Fig. 1). Visitors were asked which approach they liked and why. Sixty per cent of respondents wanted the approach and emphasis of the exhibition to be on liberation and freedom. About half of all respondents favoured mixing two approaches, with 41% wanting Dame Margaret Sparrow's story to be integrated into the exhibition, but not to be the main topic (E. MacDonald 2015).

Women's liberation



Contraception, particularly the Pill, brought freedom, control and choice to women's lives.

When the Pill was introduced in New Zealand in 1961, women could better separate sex from child-bearing, and couples could plan families more reliably.

Fig. 1 Example of the formative evaluation show cards to determine the approach of the exhibition (Gibson 2015a).

Serious

Safety net

The impact of AIDS in the 1980s brought about a wider use of condoms in New Zealand, and awareness that condoms were the only form of contraception that could protect against sexually transmitted diseases.



Less serious

What's your flavour?

Male or female, pink or black, ribbed or plain, normal or large, chocolate or mint – condoms come in all shapes and flavours. But no matter how fun they look on supermarket shelves, wearing condoms can save lives.



Figs 2 and 3 Examples of the tone test for the exhibition label text (Gibson 2015b).

To determine the exhibition's tone, three images were tested with alternative label text in serious and less serious language (Figs 2 and 3). Visitors were asked which tone they liked and why. Eighty-three per cent of respondents believed the tone of the exhibition should be serious. While some respondents recognised the power of humour, there was an overwhelming consensus that the topic was serious and needed to have a serious tone (E. MacDonald 2015).

To test visitors' likelihood of participating in writing comments within the exhibition, two mock questions were read to interviewees, who were asked which one (if any) they would respond to within an exhibition:

1. How did you first find out about contraception?
2. How has your life changed as a result of contraception compared to that of your parents?

Eighty-three per cent of respondents indicated that they would participate by answering a question, with a slightly higher response to the first question (E. MacDonald 2015).

To identify underlying themes that would be of interest, respondents were given a pile of 60 relevant words and pictures and asked to sort them into 'interesting' and 'not interesting' piles. They were then asked to take the 'interesting' pile and sort it into thematic groups. The themes of most interest were safe sex and reproduction.

Eighty-three per cent of respondents indicated that they would go to the exhibition with friends, rather than with their family or spouse (E. MacDonald 2015).¹¹

Online survey

Around the same time as the formative evaluation, a survey was posted online to gain feedback from digital visitors, and to increase the number and range of respondents. Respondents were asked to mark a set of images and words as 'interesting' or 'not so interesting' in the context of the question 'What does contraception in New Zealand mean to you?' The survey was shared via Te Papa's social media channels (Twitter, Facebook). Of the 217 people who took part, the majority were women (86.6%). High interest was expressed in every aspect. The lowest interest was in an image of a condom (72%), and the highest interest (94%) was in the phrases 'sexual revolution' and 'women's liberation'.¹²

The power of data

The findings of the formative evaluation were unequivocal about the seriousness of the topic, and the desired emphasis on stories of liberation and freedom.

Having exhibition team members plan, conduct and analyse our own visitor research created a sense of ownership in these findings (Davidson 2015: 514). In terms of 'research utility', the findings had an immediate impact on the project, because we could directly translate the insights into practice (Reussner 2008: 193, 195). Pekarik (2007: 133) notes this process of transformation: 'Team members are able to see in-person and up-close how visitors do or do not conform to the images that they carry of them ... team members are often effortlessly transformed in their thinking. Their minds naturally incorporate the new data of their direct experience and produce a new, expanded image of the visitor.'

The research also gave us confidence. Having data – no matter how small the sample – is powerful when making decisions and seeking approval (Adams 2012: 30–31). Our results convinced Te Papa's senior management and marketing and communications teams that the exhibition would be serious in tone and would integrate Dame Margaret Sparrow's story into the wider context of birth control and the sexual revolution in New Zealand society. The results directed the project's subsequent development and helped us write our objectives as follows:

The exhibition will profile Dame Margaret Sparrow's contraceptive collection, whereby visitors will appreciate the diversity of technologies and products and contemplate and discuss the relevance and significance of birth control to their own lives and others, today and throughout human history.

The exhibition ... will provide opportunities to share and discuss both the personal and the universal journeys of women to control their own fertility. (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2015b)



Fig. 4 (left) 'The pill that changed the world' (photo: Kate Whitley; MA_I.362295, Te Papa).

The exhibition

The exhibition opened on 29 May 2015, and immediately received positive press, radio coverage and social media interest, particularly in relation to Dame Margaret Sparrow and her life story (N. Macdonald 2015; Mulligan 2015; Wannan 2015).¹³ A wide range of age groups was observed visiting the exhibition, from teenagers, to middle-aged couples, to senior citizens.¹⁴ No negative feedback was received about the exhibition's topics.

A spotlight case formed the centrepiece of the gallery, where a single contraceptive pill was theatrically displayed with the statement 'The pill that changed the world' (Fig. 4).

One of the aims of the exhibition experience was to intrigue visitors with a multitude of contraceptive devices. These included examples of early technologies used by people to control fertility before the pill, a wide range of condoms and marketing strategies, examples of the vast array of oral contraceptive pills manufactured since 1961, and modern intrauterine devices and long-acting reversible and permanent contraceptive technologies. The process of choosing which objects to display was carried out by the curator and designer together, to ensure that the best objects were selected in terms of historical and technological importance, diversity of contraceptive methods for both men and women, and aesthetic qualities.

A long showcase dominated one wall and was divided into four themes by circular window masks, these focusing on early birth control, condoms, the contraceptive pill and long-acting contraceptive methods (Fig. 5). About 150

mainly small objects were displayed within these windows against circular background boards covered in soft wine-coloured fabric (Figs 6–9). No label text appeared alongside the objects; instead, visitors were encouraged to explore the drawers beneath each window for information (Fig. 10). A few objects were also embedded within these drawers (namely a fertility calculator, a female condom and emergency contraception). Most of the exhibition text was serious in tone, although some labels were headlined with 'lighter' titles, for example the introductory label for the condom display:

Get it on: Condoms

Today, no form of birth control is as widespread as the condom – or as essential for sexual health. But it wasn't always so. Condoms were often associated with promiscuity and venereal disease, and were sold discreetly, in plain packaging. They were also notoriously unreliable.

Opposite the showcase, visitors could learn about Dame Margaret Sparrow through a brief biography and two short audiovisuals. In the latter, Dame Margaret talked about her life, her heroines, and significant moments in the history of contraception and sexual health, including the impact of HIV and AIDS (Fig. 11).¹⁵

On the far wall was a participatory experience titled 'Let's talk about sex', where visitors were invited to answer the question: 'If you could give your younger self one piece of advice about contraception, what would it be?' The question had become more personal and reflective than originally intended, as we felt that an introspective approach – advising oneself – would be easier to answer and was more likely to engage visitors in conversation and/or participation.

Visitors wrote their answers on circular pieces of paper, attaching them to a large graphic printed in the shape of a 1960s pill packet (Figs 12 and 13).



Fig. 5 The overall display of contraceptive objects (photo: Kate Whitley; MA_I.362302, Te Papa).



Fig. 10 Visitors opened the drawers underneath the displays for information (photo: Kate Whitley; Te Papa, MA_I.362298).

Figs 6–9 The four themes of the exhibition: early birth control, condoms, the contraceptive pill and long-acting contraceptive methods (photos: Kate Whitley; Te Papa, MA_I.374713, MA_I.374714, MA_I.374715, MA_I.374716).



Fig. 11 Audiovisuals featuring Dame Margaret Sparrow (photo: Kate Whitley; Te Papa MA_I.362309).

Summative evaluation

After the exhibition opened, we were eager to complete the cycle of evaluation to see if our goals had been met, and to determine whether the exhibition had made an impact on visitors, and what those impacts might be. The latter aim was of particular interest as Te Papa headed into a major exhibition renewal project. The desire for data to both validate our approach and to inform future programming was part of our agenda.

The author conducted interviews outside the exhibition over two weeks in September and October 2015. Potential respondents were solicited as they left the exhibition. Thirty-five visitors participated in the evaluation.¹⁶ Interviews lasted from five to 15 minutes, capturing immediate responses as well as more in-depth reflections.¹⁷



Figs 12 and 13 ‘Let’s talk about sex’ participatory activity and visitors’ responses (photos: Kate Whitley; Te Papa, MA_I.362316, MA_I.362306).

Results

‘Don’t see contraception in a museum every day!’¹⁸

The results of the summative evaluation showed that only 20% of respondents knew about the exhibition beforehand and had made it a purposeful part of their visit to Te Papa. The majority of respondents (71%) had either seen an exhibition sign once they were inside the museum, or had simply come across the exhibition as they passed by (Gibson 2015c).

Generally, the exhibition did not change interviewees’ thinking about contraception. However, a third of respondents learned more about particular objects and contraceptive history: ‘Even with my background [midwifery] I’ve seen things I didn’t know about’.

Sixty per cent of visitors were highly satisfied with the exhibition. A few interviewees identified limitations of the exhibition and commented on how it could have been better. One suggested that ‘there’s room for the latest issues, e.g. young women struggling; there’s more to it than just contraception. We need to school up young women ... Abortion is worth investigating’.¹⁹

Most of the interviewees (86%) identified the objects as being the most memorable parts of the exhibition. Half of all respondents were particularly intrigued by the early technology, including the douches, washable condom, sea sponge and Coca-Cola bottle top (‘Coke bottle top! Cool little object ... excellent storytelling device’).²⁰

Forty per cent of the interviewees knew about Dame Margaret Sparrow beforehand, with just under a third identifying her films as memorable parts of the exhibition. One respondent observed that it was ‘great to see a woman handling the topic ... I think those films are pretty cool – it’s her talking ... So valuable having women speaking in context of history’.

The majority of respondents (74%) indicated that they would like to see similar exhibitions about social issues at Te Papa in the future, and that it was ‘highly likely’ they would visit these (71%) (Gibson 2015c). The most commonly mentioned topics were health (including mental health), history and change, environmental issues, and human rights (including women’s issues and racism). One visitor noted: ‘It’s easy to detach yourself with exhibitions in the past ... it’s easy to judge people then. Racism and sexism are still huge. Exhibitions about important topics make things better’.

This high level of engagement can also be found in the analysis of the visitor comments left behind in the participatory experience ‘Let’s talk about sex’. More than 2200 comments written on circles of paper survived at the end of the exhibition and were analysed by the author. The key finding was that the majority of comments (77.5%) indicated positive and/or constructive engagement with the topics of contraception, sex, sexuality and sexual health (Gibson 2017). This activity also provided an insight into how some visitors thought about the objects and topics on display (e.g. ‘chocolate-flavoured condoms are a bit weird’, ‘100 years ago, sex was DANGEROUS’)²¹ (Gibson 2017).

Assumptions versus findings

‘the diversity within the audience is always greater than we can consciously accommodate’.

(Pekarik 2007: 134)

As curator of the exhibition, I had made several assumptions about the people who would visit *Contraception*. It is very hard for a museum professional to let go of the image of a visitor they carry in their head, and ‘often this image is very like the person doing the visualizing’ (Pekarik 2007: 133). Several of my assumptions about our visitors were not upheld by the findings of the summative evaluation.

For example, I had assumed that people would purposefully visit the exhibition, but most visitors simply came across it or saw a sign nearby. This finding indicates that signage is critical, particularly for small exhibitions within an institution the size of Te Papa.

I had assumed that people would be surprised, and perhaps even shocked or offended by the exhibition, but most interviewees were familiar with the topics and many of the objects. Their pre-existing knowledge, attitudes and personal experiences about contraception appeared to be largely confirmed by the exhibition (Doering 1999: 81).

I had thought that visitors would be impressed by Te Papa’s courage in mounting such an exhibition. But I was soon cut down to size when a visitor commented: ‘[it] could be a lot better ... It’s just a bunch of contraceptives on display ... When unsuccessful, it wrecks lives.’

I was concerned that some of the objects would be dismissed as inconsequential, particularly the many small cardboard boxes on display. However, most visitors identified objects as the most memorable parts of the

exhibition. This was partly due to successful design strategies (e.g. the arrangement of the contraceptive pill packets from A to Z),²² and to the inclusion of both familiar objects and unexpected items such as the Coca-Cola bottle top.

An assumption that was upheld by the findings was that most visitors agreed that exhibitions like Contraception are important. I received many emphatic answers of ‘absolutely’ and ‘definitely’ when visitors were asked if they would like to see more such topics displayed at Te Papa.

Conclusion

From a curatorial perspective, *Contraception: Uncovering the collection of Dame Margaret Sparrow* was a success because it met our objectives to profile Dame Margaret Sparrow’s collection and enable visitors to appreciate the diversity of objects, contemplate the relevance and significance of birth control, and have the opportunity to share and discuss their own journeys in controlling fertility. It also brought a nationally significant collection into wider public consciousness than in its previous context as a semi-public sexual health and education collection.

The development of the project was also successful because it was informed by the findings of visitor research. Researching our visitors through formative and summative evaluations gave us better tools and confidence to create the exhibition, and to take our findings into future programming and practice. In addition, having members of the exhibition team conduct their own research was a transformative experience, both in terms of understanding the complexity of visitors and challenging our assumptions, and in realising the power of the data to gain institutional approval.

The formative evaluation was valuable for showing that visitors favoured an approach based on liberation and freedom, with Dame Margaret Sparrow’s story integrated into the exhibition. The majority of visitors favoured a serious tone to the exhibition, and indicated they would participate in writing comments within the exhibition. The 2200-plus comments written by visitors indicated a high level of constructive engagement with the exhibition’s themes.

The summative evaluation was valuable for showing that topics such as contraception are of interest to our audiences. The key findings were, in turn, prosaic, humbling and reassuring. They were prosaic in that

visitation was generally casual and therefore signage was critical in attracting people’s attention, and they were humbling in that most visitors came with prior knowledge and their own narratives. The findings were reassuring in that the most memorable elements of the exhibition were the objects, regardless of how small or ordinary, and that the majority of interviewees wanted to see similar exhibitions at Te Papa in the future.

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Notes

- 1 On display in the Ilott Room, Level 4, Te Papa, 29 May 2015 to 31 January 2016.
- 2 The exhibition was a finalist in the social history category of the New Zealand Museum Awards in 2016 (Museums Aotearoa 2016: 8). In an issue of the *New Zealand Journal of History* devoted to New Zealand's sexual histories, Chris Brickell and Angela Wanhalla observed that museums are taking the lead in contributing sexual histories drawn from sources other than writing, citing the material culture of *Contraception: Uncovering the collection of Dame Margaret Sparrow* as their example (Brickell & Wanhalla 2016: 9).
- 3 Internal reports may reveal such data (e.g. Pekarik *et al.* 1995; Hall 2013). Direct communication with museum staff can also tease out information on audiences (see Note 5).
- 4 *Taking Precautions* was curated by Megan Hicks, who had collected contraceptive material in the 1980s when it was considered 'quite daring'. *Recollect: Health and Medicine* (August 2015 to mid-2016) was curated by Tilly Boleyn, who noted that the exhibition 'sparks a lot of discussion between people, particularly women' (pers. comm., 18 January 2016).
- 5 The *Virtue, Vice, & Contraband* exhibition was drawn from a large contraceptive collection donated by Canadian Percy Skuy, a past president of the Ortho Pharmaceutical company in Toronto (Case Western Reserve University 2010). Skuy's collection had formerly been on display in the company's headquarters since the 1960s. In terms of audience research, James Edmondson, Chief Curator of the Dittrick Medical History Center, noted that *Virtue, Vice, & Contraband* had 'been very well received' and had been a 'real game changer for us, in an overwhelmingly positive way. It has pivoted us from being a doctors' museum to embrace the patient's experience. Demographics on our museum Facebook page show that women 25–35 make up over 60% of our traffic there' (James Edmondson, pers. comm., 29 October 2015).
- 6 The author surveyed 17 museums throughout New Zealand in late 2015 about their contraceptive holdings and whether such material was on display.
- 7 Pahiatua and Districts Museum Society holds a douche can that is classified as a 'household object' (eHive 2018). A similar douche can was 'found in collection' at Te Papa in 2012 with the simple classification of 'douches'. It may have been unregistered in storage for decades. Its catalogue record (registration number GH024681) has been upgraded to reference 'sex' and 'birth control' (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa n.d.).
- 8 Te Papa's Collections Online can be accessed at <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz>.
- 9 A successful model of practice is the University of Exeter's Sex and History project, which uses objects from the past to talk about sex and sexuality with young people (Fisher *et al.* 2017).
- 10 Interviewee quotes from the formative evaluation (E. MacDonald 2015).
- 11 This particular finding played out in the summative evaluation, where visiting with friends dominated (Gibson 2015c).
- 12 Online survey results that indicated the degree of interest in selected images and phrases: image of a condom (72.1%); image of a Family Planning poster (73.3%); the word 'condom' (75.7%); 'morality' (76.4%); image of contraceptive pills (81.1%); 'health scares' (83.2%); image of douche (83.9%); image of female condom (86.2%); image of women's health protest (86.8%); the word 'pleasure' (90.9%); image of a Dalkon Shield IUD (91.1%); 'invention' (93.2%); the phrases 'sexual revolution' (94.1%) and 'women's liberation' (94.6%). Respondents were 86.6% female and 11.1% male (2.3% preferred not to say).
- 13 Radio coverage included Kim Hill interviewing Dame Margaret Sparrow on Radio New Zealand, on 6 June 2015 (Hill 2015), and Teresa Cowie interviewing the curator/author on Radio New Zealand, on 12 January 2016.
- 14 Observed by Te Papa Visitor Host Basil Chan (pers. comm., 16 September 2015).
- 15 The audiovisuals can be seen on YouTube under the titles 'Birth control: changing womans lives' (Te Papa) and 'From condoms to consumer rights' (Te Papa). The second of these begins with an image of Dame Margaret Sparrow in front of her display cabinet at Family Planning's head office in Wellington.
- 16 Summative evaluation demographic breakdown: gender – females (68.5%), males (31.5%); age – 16–30 years (34.2%), 30–50 years (37%), 50–80 years (18.4%);

ethnicity – New Zealand European/Pākehā (65.7%), other European (20%), Asian (11.4%), Pasifika (2.8%); place of origin – Wellington (17.1%), rest of New Zealand (57.1%), international (25.7%); type of visit – with friends (37%), visiting alone (34.2%), with family member (20%), with a partner (17.1%).

- 17 Summative evaluation questions:
1. Did you know about Dame Margaret Sparrow before visiting?
 2. Has this exhibition changed your way of thinking about contraception? How?
 3. What was your overall experience of the exhibition?
 4. Why did you visit this exhibition today?
 5. What is the most memorable part of the exhibition?
 6. This exhibition talks about contemporary social issues such as women's health. Would you like to see similar exhibitions at Te Papa in the future?
 7. What is the likelihood of visiting similar exhibitions?
- 18 Interviewee quotes in this section are from the summative evaluation (Gibson 2015c).
- 19 The topic of abortion was not explored in the exhibition.
- 20 A Coca-Cola bottle top was displayed to represent the use of the effervescent drink as a vaginal douche after sex in the 1950s–60s, when it was difficult for young people to obtain contraception before marriage.
- 21 *Contraception* exhibition – visitor comments (originals) – 852917 (Te Papa Corporate Records).
- 22 An example of the success of the A to Z arrangement of the contraceptive pill packets can be seen in its inclusion in artist Ann Shelton's work *Dark matter* (2016: 193–195).

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