



THE WARREN ALPERT
Medical School
BROWN UNIVERSITY

“When You Lock Up a Woman, You Lock Up a Nation”

Narratives of Reproductive Healthcare from the Rhode Island Women’s Prison

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background

“There is no reproductive healthcare – there is no healthcare for women in prison.”

Receiving compassionate, trauma-informed reproductive healthcare in prison is nearly impossible. The system is Kafkaesque, with barriers to care at every level:

- **Restricted Services:** limited preventative care modalities, no or limited contraception, abortion considered elective
- **Cost:** no insurance while incarcerated, care requires co-pays over one month’s salary
- **Role of COs:** have final say on who gets care and when
- **Provider Incompetence:** poorly trained, treat with revoked licenses, abnormal results regularly undetected
- **Mistreatment:** non-consensual procedures, shackles during birth
- **Retaliation:** COs in charge of complaint files and will brutally retaliate

rationale

Few medical students or providers fully understand the harsh reality of what it’s like to receive healthcare while incarcerated. There is evidence that non-stereotypical portrayals of women in prison has a significant impact on the empathy and association non-incarcerated people have for incarcerated people. I believe that people’s indifference or even hostility to the plight of incarcerated women seeking reproductive healthcare can be transformed into empathy through storytelling that does not flinch from the realities of current practices.

methods

To date, I have interviewed 5 women who were formerly incarcerated at the Rhode Island Adult Correctional Institution (ACI). Their interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. From the women’s experiences, I built slides and a lesson plan for the Incarceration and Health course at Brown. Interviews and the creative aspect of this project are ongoing.

selected quotations

babies

*I was three months pregnant and an OB/GYN came to see me drunk as hell. I had the **worst vaginal exam of my life**. Two days later, I was rushed to the hospital with a miscarriage. I was taken in **shackles**. The D&C was done in **shackles**.*

***When you lock up a woman, you lock up a nation.** You shut a whole family down.*

*Healthcare and incarceration don’t go together. **Does a baby have a place in prison?** The only thing that can exist is abolition.*

breasts

*When I got arrested, I begged them to let me nurse. My son has no fault in this, why should he be sentenced for a crime he didn’t commit? They purposely left me in the station for 24 hours. I was gorged, I was blowing a fever of 105, I had veins coming out of my breasts. I thought I was going to die. So, **I took my shirt off, sat down on a cold metal seat, and expressed myself onto the floor.***

*I lost my milk. I was disconnecting from my child. I didn’t have touch, feel, warmth. **Every time my breasts filled up, I knew my son was somewhere in the world crying for me***

blood

*During visits you weren’t able to wear tampons because of the strip search. I had a visit on my heaviest day and had to bend down and cough and **I was just dripping everywhere, absolutely covered**. And I couldn’t take a shower after because it wasn’t shower time. I was crying the whole visit. That was the most traumatizing thing I’ve ever gone through.*

*I watched women get **sent to the hospital over and over again** for toxic shock syndrome because they had to use makeshift tampons.*

brain

*I didn’t know who I was as a parent. **I didn’t know who I was as a woman.***

*When I first got in, they were like **“Do you wanna kill yourself? Do you wanna commit suicide?”** And I was like **“Yes, yes I do!”***

***I wanted to die.** Now, I wanted to die.*

better

*Doctors: You have a voice. You have a voice. **You have a voice in this.***

reflections

- Every single woman I spoke to used the phrase “worst experience of my life” during our interview.
- Having someone trust you with the weight of their experience is a thing that must be earned.
- Medical education on healthcare for currently and formerly incarcerated populations should be far more robust.
- Rhode Island’s prison system is more humane than most in the country, but women still suffer barbaric treatment. If it’s this bad here, what is it like everywhere else?
- “It is what it is” is not defeatist but the foundation of hope and action.
- “The only thing that can exist is abolition.”

acknowledgements

This project would not exist without the courage, vulnerability, and strength of the women who spoke with me. While in the interest of confidentiality, I will not be naming them here, they are all bright stars. I, and anyone else who learns from this project, owe them immense gratitude.

further reading

The slides for the Incarceration and Health PCE are available at this QR code. Use them to educate yourself on the realities of the women’s incarceration experience. More stories will be collected and will eventually be compiled into a creative nonfiction piece.

References for the project are included at the end of the slides.

