



Transcript of Interview with Dr. Janice Coleman, MD

James Marion Sims

I'm interviewing Dr. Janice Coleman...Obstetrics and Gynecology Practice, here in Columbia, South Carolina. Welcome Dr. Coleman.

Well, thank you for asking me.

We are talking about J. Marion Sims. He is a Hall of Fame Inductee. My first question to you is....who was Dr. J. Marion Sims?

Dr. J. Marion Sims is well know. I first learned of him when I was doing my internship at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta. Dr. John Thompson was my chairman and he was a "History Buff"...so Dr. Sims' name was always being tossed out...considered the kind of "Father of Gynecology".

Why is he called "The Father of Gynecology?"

That's a long story...Dr. Sims practiced in the middle 1800's.....

Up until that time...there was no "Gynecology" per-se...As a matter of fact...any exams done of the female patients....were not done visually because there were no instruments to look inside...and it was not considered "proper: for a lady to be "dis-robed" in front of a man...even if he was her physician.

There was really no obstetrical practice because the midwives did all of that. But right about that time....men started taking over...running the midwives out...and un.....Dr. Sims stepped into that void.

He was from Lancaster, South Carolina...Lancaster County...His Dad was a Sheriff there...and he went to....I guess...What's not MUSC for a semester...it sounds like...and then up to the Medical College of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

When He finished there....he did come back to Lancaster...and his Dad set him up...on Main street...with a little office...but he really didn't...hadn't been prepared for what he was to



do...because there really wasn't any internships or residencies....so they only had "book learning"

His first (2) two patients died. They were babies...about a year or year and a half...with high fever....he really didn't know what to do...and what he did do....isn't help...so...they died.

So that made him not too popular in Lancaster. I suspect that's the reason his dad moved him to Alabama...to do an apprenticeship under two doctors there.

He did apprentice under the two doctors. One of the patients that was sent to him was a man that had a....I think he was an overseer..... And he had what sounds like an abscess...in his abdomen...and Dr. Sims somehow opened that...and lanced it and drained the abscess...and the guy survived.

Remember....this is in the days before there were any

Antibiotics and no anesthesia...and

all of that...but he survived and that gave him the idea....well yeah...maybe I'll be a Surgeon..."

One of the other patients that came to him...that led to his getting this title...a woman...it sounds from the description...like she had a pro-lapsed uterus....meaning the uterus had fallen outside of the body somewhat. That happens with protracted labor...long labors...a lot of pushing....this tearing of the pelvic floor...and the supports to the uterus give way....and the uterus...at least part of it is hanging out...not a comfortable position. They sent her to him...Dr. Sims...and he came up with the idea...of putting her in the knee-chest position.

Okay?....Down on your knees on all fours....with your chest down to your knees....and that kind-of tilts the pelvis...everything fell back in...and she was cured!

He also developed...he used a little spoon...It was a pewter spoon...and he used that while she was in that position...to kind of depress the walls to look inside. That's something nobody had done before. So that...actually "seeing" what was going on. And so...that's one of the reason's he's called "The Father of Gynecology" ...and his little device...the spoon....is a pre-cursor to what we use now....the bi-valve speculum....."The Sims Speculum" ...it's called.

His work was considered controversial by medical professionals and historians.



Why was his work considered so professional?

Okay....remember....I said his work is controversial in many circles..because you have to put it into the context of when he was practicing.

This is the mid-1800's....the 19th Century....slavery was in existence....And Dr. Sims had slaves.

Much of his work...all of his early work....pioneering work....was done on slaves.

The first patient that was brought was a young lady called Anarcha.

And she had a long, protracted labor...and the problem at this time was probably that she was too young....or the baby was too big...anyway...the relationship between the baby's head and the pelvis...was not good. The head was too big...the baby was not getting through.

Now...if this goes on...for days....with the head beating against the pelvis...there's a lot of destruction of the tissues around eventually in most of the cases.....that happened at that time....the baby died.....

The bones would slide...or reach...and the baby could come through.

But the surrounding pelvic tissues were all damaged and they developed a fistula....

A fistula is a connection between two different structures. The vagina is here...the bladder sits in front...the rectum sits behind...

This particular patient developed a fistula between both places. Matter of fact...they had brought her to Dr. Sims when she wasn't able to deliver.

They brought him in....he used some type of forcep to drag the baby out...and so...that too may have contributed to her damage.

Recall...Slaves were property...and she was a big loss to her owner....that she couldn't do her work...because she was constantly dribbling urine and also stool.

So she really couldn't be around many people...so they sent her to Dr. Sims...to be "fixed".

The story is...that she underwent about (30) thirty procedures before he came across something that kind of "cured" some of the fistulas that she had.



He was using “cat-gut” stitches....sutures made from cat-gut at first....and that caused a lot of infections...so through the process of trial and error...he finally came across a steel of silver suture that he sewed he up with...and that seemed to help.

The controversy is that...once he did that...then a lot of other slave owners sent their female slaves to him....and he tried to perfect his procedure.

He built a little “hospital” in his back-yard....and he would operate on these women...um...they became kind of “obsession” with him....and he eventually...he lost most of his help...because no one wanted to do this work.....

This is in the days....again...before anesthesia. So I imagine it wasn’t the most pleasant of circumstances.

The slaves helping him.....had to help him...be his assistants.....

The controversy is that...you know....history has him as the developer of this procedure....to close the vesico-vaginal...that’s a fistula...between the bladder and the vagina....fistulas and um....and that is true.

But it is also true that he did experiment.....

Did human experimentation that would not have been tolerated in this day and time.

Um...so...the controversy it is said....well...these slaves consented....

But surely they couldn’t have consented....

They didn’t need to consent...because they were never asked....because....they were property. So that’s the controversy that surrounds him.

What would you like....hearing the controversy....would you say that he was a contributor? Would you say that he made a “contribution” to the medical profession?

Certainly, his experiments did produce a good result. Because before that...there was really no treatment. And these women lived very desolate lives...because they were shunned by the rest of society....because they were not pleasant to be around....



So...he did contribute in that sense...and he's honored for that...but we can't forget the controversy that surrounds that discovery.

There's a statue of his likeness...well...actually there's one here in south Carolina on the statehouse grounds...but uh...in Central Park...because when he...he left Alabama...he moved to New York...at what is now Bellevue Hospital....

Bellevue must have been a general hospital then...but when I lived in New York....it was only Psychiatric...but uh...he did a lot of work there...um...graduating to abdominal surgeries...and things like that...and he founded the first women's hospital up in New York....

So....he...that's why they erected a statue of his likeness, in Central Park...up about 103rd Street.

Because of the controversy surrounding him though....there have been efforts to have his statue removed because it's kind of overlooking a predominantly black area...but it's now predominantly Puerto-Rican....but still...there have been community efforts to have the statue removed because of his history.

What would you...as a physician...What would you like for people to know and remember about Dr. J. Marion Sims?

Dr. J. Marion Sims did pioneer many of the operations that we use to close Vesico-Vaginal fistula...and he did develop a lot of the instruments that we use today...and in that sense...he is "The Father of Gynecology".

What were some of the instruments that he developed?

Dr. Sims developed the Sims Speculum....um...and which we can look into the vagina...um...he developed a position to examine the rectum...um...lying people on their sides...and um...that's called "the Sims position"...um...and the knee-chest position...

So...they teach you that when you're in Medical School? Do they talk about him while you're in Medical School?

They did while I was in Medical School...in my OBGYN Rotations.

They talked about Dr. Sims?



What would they say, when they were teaching?

Well, they still mention his names...because his name is on the speculum...it's the "Sims Speculum"....and not everybody might know who J. Marion Sims is...but they know that he is credited with developing the speculum...and they teach us about the position...

I'm gonna ask you that question again....what would you like for people to know generally about Dr. J. Marion Sims...if his name was mentioned. What would you...as a physician...like for people to know?

Dr. J. Marion Sims was really a pioneer in the field of Gynecology.

He was one of the first to do an internal exam on a woman.

He developed instruments to let us visually look inside the vagina...and see the pathology that was there...and he developed a prototype of the instruments that we use today, to examine the vagina.

He developed the procedure...the prototype of the procedure to repair the fistulas of women.

What is a fistula?

A fistula is an abnormal connection between say...the bladder and the vagina...which is what we're referring to in our discussion....or between the vagina and the rectum.

But it's an abnormal connection...so secretions pass from one into the other.



Transcript of Interview with Dr. Judith Burgis

James Marion Sims

Who was Dr. James Marion Sims?

Dr. James Marion Sims was a 19th Century Surgeon. He was born in South Carolina, but did lots of his practice in the South as well as in the North.

He's famous for his surgery and he's also famous for trying to help patients with what was thought to be an incurable problem.

What was the incurable problem that Dr. James Marion Sims helped patients with?

Dr. Sims recognized that women in the 19th century had a problem called "obstructed Labor" and this is very different than what women experience today. In the 19th Century, Caesarian delivery was not available to women. So many women suffered.

Some women even died with obstructed labor, when the fetus or the baby was too large to fit through the mom's pelvis.

So, in most cases, the baby died...took several days to then deliver, and this caused destruction of the tissues of the birth canal area of the mother....resulting in...if the mother lived....connections between the woman's bladder...and or...her rectum...and her vagina.

You can imagine that these women suffered...and depression and suicide rates were high in those women that lived.

Dr. Sims worked to help these women. The traditional medical thinking of the day was that...this was not curable. That these women were going to suffer...they were going to be ostracized...they were often lived together apart from society.

Dr. Sims has a somewhat controversial past because he began his operations on slaves in the 19th Century....and in today's world...it would seem sort of inconceivable because we train...we train with learning about vulnerable populations and we talk about "informed consent" when we talk about caring for patients. It's...you have to go back to his times.



I think that he felt like he was helping patients.

I read some excerpts from his diary...where some of the patients that he operated on...also later became his surgical assistants.....and I thought this seemed like he was a kind man...and someone that the women trusted...rather than an experimental surgeon who was doing crazy things to people.

So...I admire that work...because no one knew how to repair this defect in patients...or women...and the women's lives that he helped...he helped them enormously...they could return to society and lead productive lives.

Now, my understanding is that this defect is called a "Vesicovaginal fistula." Am I correct?

It's pronounced "Vesicovaginal Fistula" ...and that is correct....and it's...a fistula means that there's a connection between two places that shouldn't have a connection. So....vesico in Latin is for bladder....and then vagina is for vagina...and so you can imagine if a patient had a connection between their vagina. They would be constantly wet...and in the 19th century... there were no sanitary products to deal with this. In fact....there were reports of women sitting on stools with holes in the stools.....because they couldn't walk around. They couldn't move anywhere else.

So essentially when this type of defect happened....their lives were dramatically changed for the worse.

When he did the operations on slaves...many times... this was done without anesthesia...and done in makeshift hospitals. That's considered controversial....

Yes....it is controversial. However....the very first operations he did...in the South...were one year before the invention of "Ether Anesthesia"....

So...that allegation that his first operations were done without anesthesia....that service was really not available.

I did read some excerpts from his diary...where he spoke about anesthesia...and I think that he did have one miscalculation.



He felt that these operations were not painful enough to need anesthesia. And even after anesthesia was available.....he still did not widely use it for the first two years.

It's hard for us to conceive of that but...it was...

I think some medical practices are just incorrect. So he was incorrect about that....in his later year...after anesthesia was available.

He is considered "The Father of Modern-Day OBGYN. Talk about him being considered in medical circles..."The Father of Modern-Day Obstetrics and Gynecology. Was it not practiced before he decided to start doing these surgeries?

In the 19th Century, there really weren't many MD Obstetricians. Babies were delivered largely at home...by midwives...or even by just a trained attendant...not even a midwife.

When Dr. Sims began to practice and began to repair fistulas...it was largely unheard of...in fact...he himself said that he was not interested in diseases of women....until he had a patient that had a problem with her uterus.

And when he successfully repaired that....he became interested in pelvic organs...and gynecologic surgery.

When he actually finally repaired a fistula...what was the reaction? In medical communities and around the world....did he do papers? Was he heralded? He was celebrated....am I correct?

He... He was. It was an amazing breakthrough...and in France and in other parts of Europe....this was thought to be incurable...in fact....the surgeons had largely given up trying to repair fistula. So, Dr. Sims was regarded as a pioneer....an innovator...and I think patients today still benefit from the fact that we learned in the 19th century that "fistula" is a problem that can be repaired.

What would you like for students...or for people in general...to know about Dr. James Marion Sims?

Dr. James Marion Sims was a pioneer in his field. He was innovative...he was caring...and he tried to make the lives better for all of the patients that he encountered.



Dr. Burgis...We understand that Dr. James Marion Sims is responsible for inventing or pioneering use of the speculum. Can you speak to that?

Yes. Dr. Marion Sims needed to visualize the tissues upon which he was operating...and he originally used spoons to separate tissues. And this led to the invention of a speculum or a self-retaining retractor that would help doctors see the tissue more clearly...allow them to repair a defect more accurately.

Okay...is there anything else would have...I thought that he was responsible for putting...not putting together...many of the instruments up here? Only the speculum?

There's a speculum that we call..."The Sims Speculum"...today. And I wonder if that's a derivative of something that he invented.