

Copyright 2003 Madison Newspapers, Inc.
Capital Times (Madison, WI)

February 8, 2003 Saturday, ALL Editions

SECTION: LOCAL/STATE; Pg. 3A

LENGTH: 396 words

HEADLINE: STERILIZING 'DEFECTIVES' WAS SEEN AS PROGRESSIVE

BYLINE: Anita Weier

BODY:

The eugenics movement that swept the United States in the early decades of the 20th century led to the sterilization of more than 60,000 people.

The objective of the movement - which developed in England, Germany and the United States - was to create better human beings through breeding (eugenics is Greek for "better genes"), but it resulted in certain groups being labeled genetically inferior.

A belief developed that mental illness, genetic defects and social ills could be eliminated by sterilization. As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes opined in 1927, "It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind."

Fear of those who were different and "defective" was a factor.

In the South, young black women often were sterilized.

Some link to eugenics Adolf Hitler's sterilization programs and attempts to destroy "inferior" populations.

In the United States, 33 states had sterilization programs. Some continued into the 1970s and 1980s.

Officials in Virginia, Oregon, North Carolina and South Carolina have apologized for what was done in their states, and advocates for disabled people are asking President Bush to apologize on behalf of the nation.

In Wisconsin, newly appointed Department of Health and Family Services Secretary Helene Nelson said no one has asked for an apology.

Because sterilizations ended in Wisconsin in 1963, many people who were

operated on may have died, and she doesn't know where others might be, Nelson said.

In three of the states that have apologized, the practice continued much longer. Published reports have said that the practice continued until 1981 in Oregon, 1979 in Virginia and 1974 in North Carolina. South Carolina sterilized people through the 1960s, according to The Associated Press.

"I think it's sad and regrettable that people with developmental disabilities were not treated as people with equal rights and opportunities to live in the community. I'm glad this practice was stopped in the 1960s. It's an outmoded and misguided idea," policy and law, Nelson said.

"The best thing we can do now is offer great services for independent lives to serve the developmentally disabled fairly and well in their communities."

LOAD-DATE: February 9, 2003