

Vivian Dowding: Birth Control Activist 1892-

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The legal risks of birth control¹ promotion more than forty years ago never thwarted Vivian Dowding as she drove the back roads of British Columbia in her work for women's welfare. Employed as a field worker by the Parents' Information Bureau (PIB) of Kitchener, Ontario, and based in Kamloops, she brought this preventive health program to low-income women in the BC interior every summer from 1937 to 1944. At the same time, by correspondence, and without fee, she advised Reverend A.H. Tyrer of Toronto in the preparation of *Where Did WE Come From, Mother Dear?* This must have been the first factual "sex education" book for children ever published in Canada.² She returned to PIB work in the Vancouver area from 1956 to about 1965. Dowding's story is particularly interesting because the background against which her activism developed, and because to her it was more than a job: her mission was to help other women end their fears of unwanted pregnancy. Although she knew the dangers of the work, she "enjoyed every minute of it."³

To understand the background of Dowding's motivation, one should know that, after World War I, the climate for birth control advocacy was full of contradictions. Birth control had been illegal since 1892. Section 207 of the Criminal Code of Canada stated that, unless an accused could prove that promotion or provision of birth control methods had not "corrupted morals" but was "for the public good", a conviction could bring two years in prison.⁴ Also, the subject was taboo in "polite" conversation. Nevertheless, by abstinence, by contraception, by induced abortion, even infanticide, the crude birthrate of Canada had been declining since before the national census of 1871. Total fertility had shrunk from 6.8 children per married woman in 1871 to 2.6 children in 1937. Although prosperous couples had smaller families, high fertility among poor women remained.⁵ For many of the latter, escape from debilitating annual pregnancies was a continuing quest. Those

who had no knowledge of contraception, or whose attempts at contraception failed, often risked their lives through self-induced abortions or visits to illegal practitioners. Some women died.

The practice of contraception proceeded to discredit the 1892 law. The well-to-do could purchase commercially made contraceptives from "under the counter" of a friendly pharmacist, or they could obtain materials for homemade birth control methods through department store mail order catalogues. But not the poor. Because health and welfare services for low-income families were meagre or non-existent, many social reformers urged the use of birth control. Not only was a small family a right, but maternal and child health would benefit. Relatively effective methods of birth control did exist, they said, and governments should offer them free to all who wanted them.

From the 1920s, a few Western Canadian feminists like Violet McNaughton of the *Western Producer*, quietly told inquirers how to get help.⁶ Nellie McClung and Judge Emily Murphy wrote in favour of the idea.⁷ In the British Columbia Legislature in the 1930s, MLAs Dorothy Steeves and Laura Jamieson advocated provision of birth control information and services.⁸ Members of some women's organizations, for example, the United Farm Women of Alberta in 1932, passed resolutions demanding such programs.⁹ Unlike the fight for the vote, however, women did not mobilize large pressure groups to win the birth control "cause". Only a few small groups dared to try. Some health and welfare professionals and public officials privately supported the idea, but they used the 1892 law to justify their inaction.

Although some growth-oriented business, religious, and political interest groups were strongly opposed to birth control, one fearless exception was Dowding's employer, Canadian industrialist A.R. Kaufman, who manufactured rubber boots. This philanthropist believed that palliative measures were useless in meeting social needs. Therefore, early in 1930 he began to establish birth control services for the Kitchener unemployed. Being a cautious man, he obtained legal advice and through his factory nurse he sought the opinions of his own laid-off workers. Their response was positive. After experiments in service delivery, Kaufman settled on a closely controlled, cost-effective system of home-visiting followed by mailing safe, easy-to-use contraceptives. This non-profit program could meet demand and yet serve "the public good".

Kaufman continued his defiance of the 1892 law. By mid-1930s he had expanded the service by employing married women as nurse organizers and field workers in many parts of Canada. Unexpectedly, one of the Parents' Information Bureau staff, Dorothea Palmer,¹⁰ who was charged with violation of Section 207 of the Criminal Code was arrested in an Ottawa suburb in 1936. After a lengthy trial, Kaufman's lawyers won a landmark defense based on "the public good". Records of the PIB program are incomplete,¹¹ and most of the employees have disappeared; however, Vivian Dowding's story describes the role of the field worker, and brings out its human interest aspects.

In a society changing its attitudes towards birth control, Dowding's motivation to work for the PIB lay also in her own experience with pregnancy and birth control, and in her growing feminism. Before her marriage in Kamloops in 1913, her mother had instructed her in douching for prevention of conception. Planning to space her pregnancies, Dowding managed very well for the first three years with this method alone. When it failed, she had three sons in three years:

I tell you, when I got pregnant the third time, I was just about ready to jump off a bridge. I was just in tears. My husband would take me to a picture show or something, and as soon as I came out of the picture show I would drip tears all the way home...I didn't want another one so quickly.¹²



Private Collection

Vivian Dowding and her husband, John, c.1945.

She and her husband used contraceptives to avoid another pregnancy. They had some success with foam tablets and she recalls nightly trips to the kitchen tap to check condoms for leaks. Faced with such uncertainty, she decided to learn all she could about contraception. Reading about Margaret Sanger's fight for birth control, Dowding developed a strong admiration for her courage.

She wrote to Sanger in New York for a copy of the "revised fourteenth edition" of *Family Limitation*, re-issued by Sanger's Clinical Research Bureau about 1930. Dowding treasured it for many years. The pamphlet contained information about contraceptives. It described the condom, the "pessary" or rubber womb cap, and several examples of diaphragms and cervical caps. Also, it told how to block the entrance to the cervix with a sea sponge or cotton tampon soaked in a spermicide. It gave recipes, too, for

homemade, soluble, vaginal contraceptive suppositories. The pamphlet doubted the effectiveness of the "safe period", coitus interruptus (withdrawal), breast feeding, and the douche, but it did recommend douching "for cleanliness".¹³ As time went on, the diaphragm became the most popular and, seemingly the most effective, method in North America.

Also, Dowding wrote to Reverend A.H. Tyrer, a retired Anglican clergyman in Toronto who, in the early 1930s, was becoming well known for his well-researched birth control information. Tyrer sent her his own leaflet. A lengthy correspondence followed, during which Tyrer sent Dowding drawings of human male and female reproductive organs, and a description of the physiology of human reproduction. Dowding also acquired a diaphragm for herself.¹⁴

By this time, since Kaufman and Tyrer were also collaborating, Tyrer recommended Dowding as a prospective PIB field worker in British Columbia. To help other women in this special way appealed to her feminism. Furthermore, the job was a unique combination of service and adventure. Because her husband had taught her how to drive their car, she agreed to work for the PIB in the BC Interior.

Dowding began her mission in the summer of 1937. She does not recall the number of women she visited during those seven years, but she worked for the PIB every summer until she and her husband moved to Vancouver in 1944. She would make calls from Kamloops east to Salmon Arm and Vernon, or north to Quesnel and Wells, near Barkerville. She might travel north to the lumber town of Giscome, north-east of Prince George. Another summer she might go west to Lytton, and the Bralorne mine, or east and south through the Okanagan Valley and Trail or to the Lower Fraser Valley. She was determined to deliver the program wherever there was demand.¹⁵

Although Kaufman had won the Palmer defense in Ontario there was always a chance that opponents of the Parents' Information Bureau in BC would challenge it in some way, and that Dowding, too, might be harassed. In those days, too, it took courage to drive alone over the narrow gravel highways in the province. It took more courage to negotiate the steep side roads and hair-raising switchbacks leading to logging and mining camps where she had heard wives were waiting for her help. She recalled one place where she had to drive across a deep gulch on two boards! In another place:

You could only use the road at certain times because of the trucks coming down, and there were places where you couldn't pass, and it meant backing up. I only went over that road once, but if there was only one woman up there who needed me, I'd go again. They knew I had a feeling for them. One woman told me she even thought of setting fire to the house, and burning herself and the whole family--she was so beside herself.

My work was to be with people that were low income. I wasn't to go house-to-house. I was to go to a doctor first, and tell him who I was, and why I was there. And I got a wonderful reception, most of the time.

Many doctors told her that they knew nothing about contraception, which was not taught in medical schools. When a few had learned anything about it, they had learned from each other. Although some doctors had sets of rubber rings to measure diaphragm size, their skills were uncertain. One woman told Dowding that she had been given a pessary so large that it had popped out of her vagina when she leaned over the baby buggy!

Doctors were not her only source of referrals; Dowding was expected to get them from local women. When she arrived in a new community where there was no obvious starting point, she would find the poorest looking neighbourhood and look for a clothesline covered with diapers. She would be welcomed, Dowding said, and referrals would be easy from that moment on. She said, "Everybody knew who had a baby; and they often discussed their birth control problems with each other."

Using Tyrer's drawings, Dowding would explain ovulation, fertilization, and contraceptive methods. She would tell them that two methods used together were more effective than one; for example, a condom with contraceptive jelly was a recommended combination. With each client, Dowding would fill out an application form for contraceptives. The necessary information included the number of children, living and dead; the woman's medical history, including her abortions; income, condition of the house, and religion. Her desired methods would be listed. If the client's doctor had fitted her for a diaphragm, its size and the doctor's signature were added. If the woman was illiterate, a friend could sign the request. Then, Dowding would send the application, with her own comments, to the PIB in Kitchener. As the PIB was always watching for enemies, the application would be scrutinized.

When the request was approved, a package of contraceptives would be mailed directly to the applicant. A leaflet describing all the methods and the locations of other sources of relevant information would be enclosed. The box would contain contraceptive jelly with an applicator, condoms, and/or foam powder to be used with a sponge or an absorbent cotton tampon. The first package was usually free. From that point on, the woman was expected to reorder. If she could afford a "donation" of two dollars she would enclose it. When she was unable to pay the charge, she explained her reasons, so that Kaufman could authorize free service.

The PIB paid Dowding. Her wage of two dollars per client, even in the Depression years, was enough to cover her travelling expenses and leave extra income for herself. On the road, she would usually stay at a local hotel or, if necessary, at a client's house. Her first visits were in Salmon Arm. She recalled:

I was absolutely amazed at the number there who were on relief.¹⁶ Some were so poor I often bought food for them. They lived in hovels--in shacks and lean-tos they had built themselves. Some had to walk miles for their relief cheques. The men working in the relief camps for twenty cents a day were better off.¹⁷...I was always well received. A woman turned me down only once. That was in the Mission district...but she was really nice about it. The doctor there was the only [medical]

exception, and he was very rude. I was in his office and he practically pushed me out...The waiting room was full of people...and I was very embarrassed. He told me he wasn't interested in any way, shape or form, and that he was going to get the police to run me out of town. I went to the police myself, and told them the doctor was trying to put me out of town for talking birth control to mothers. They told me not to worry. It would be all right. So I went on just the same...Every other doctor was cooperative--terrifically so.¹⁸

In Trail, Dowding found numerous clients, but when their PIB packages started coming in the mail, the postmaster held every one. She thinks he opened one, or perhaps one broke open. In any case, he believed the contents were illegal. When one of the women told Dowding that she had not received her box, Dowding recalled the following: "I went to the post office. When I looked through the wicket I could see them...so I wrote Mr. Kaufman...and they were out of there in no time."

In Chilliwack, the wife of a returned World War Two soldier was in very poor health from repeated pregnancies, yet her husband was demanding more babies so that she would receive more family allowance. Dowding said, "She was so frightened of another pregnancy that she sort of hung on to me. I was glad to help her".¹⁹ Also, Kaufman was willing to finance voluntary sterilizations for poor women; Dowding arranged many such operations. Sometimes, however, she would fail. On one occasion a school teacher asked her to call on a young woman with several children who was living common law with an older man.

I was told that the children would never get past grade two or three. So I went there and talk about flies!! I never saw the likes of it...A smelly little baby in a crib, with flies all over it. Oh dear! I went to a store and bought a dozen of those fly things and told her to put them up. Then I persuaded that girl to have a sterilization. Because she wasn't married, I had to get her mother's consent. Then I told the doctor that Kaufman would pay \$25.00 for the operation. He said he would have to take it up with the hospital board because there was no one to pay the hospital bill. I said, "Well, the hospital is going to have a baby every year, so who's going to pay for that?" The hospital gave in, and I got it all arranged, but that old man talked her out of it. Said he'd leave her if she had the operation. Oh dear! What a case!

Dowding's interest in birth control involved her in education beyond BC. Although she never met Tyrer in person, he consulted her by mail during the late 1930s about the content of *Where Did WE Come From, Mother Dear?* This forty-six page book assisted mothers who wanted to answer children's questions honestly. The opening chapter on fathers and mothers was followed by a discussion of babies and love, a description of love among the flowers, and finally sections on fish and birds. The book described human babies and conception and concluded, "Love is the greatest thing in the world!" Some of

the illustrations were done by one of Dowding's sons, then a student at the University of Toronto. The foreward was written by Dr. Alan Brown, internationally known physician-in-chief at the Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto. Support for the booklet came from the National Committee for Mental Hygiene, from the eminent psychiatrist Dr. Brock Chisholm, and others.²⁰ Tyrer's debt to Dowding was acknowledged in his inscription of her copy: "With love and deep regard to my dear friend Vivian Dowding, to whom I owe more than I can ever repay for many suggestions, and still more for much inspiration in my later life work. Toronto, Ontario, March 12, 1940."²¹

A sixteen-page promotional leaflet, *Your Child Needs Your Help*, urged the use of *Where Did WE Come From*, also available in French, to assist children in understanding their sexuality. Parents were urged to explain wet dreams and menstruation to boys and girls before either event occurred. Emphasis was placed on informing children about venereal diseases and their consequences. Circumcision was not necessary, it continued, nor would masturbation cause insanity, as was commonly believed.²²

As noted, Dowding returned to PIB work in the Vancouver area in 1956.²³ Starting in 1960, a new birth control association, the Society for Population Planning, was being formed in Vancouver so she was no longer alone in the advocacy field. According to its minutes, many of its first cases were referred to her and the PIB, but she was also a member of its executive committee in 1961 and 1962.²⁴ Before she retired in 1965, Dowding's support for birth control included voluntary sterilization for men.

By 1960, vasectomy was becoming very popular in British Columbia, but men had to travel to the United States for the procedure. When, early in 1963, Dr. Philip M. Alderman of North Vancouver added the operation to his general practice, Dowding asked him to accept her referrals. Alderman recalled:

Mrs. Dowding and I seemed to be riding some kind of crest of interest in and popularity of vasectomy, and, within a year or two, she was referring dozens of patients to me each month. I was doing many more than I ever dreamed of, and everybody seemed pleased with what was going on.²⁵

In her reminiscences, she stressed that she had been very happy in her work and would do it all again. She said, "I can hardly remember a town I wasn't in." Her sympathetic understanding of other women's fears "just seemed...to put some new spark of life in them".²⁶ Dowding remains a staunch supporter of the birth control movement, and of the principle of voluntary choice.

Footnotes

1. The term "birth control" was coined by Margaret Sanger and her friends in New York in 1914. It meant "pregnancy prevention," i.e., contraception, and did not include induced abortion.
2. A.H. Tyrer, *Where did WE Come From, Mother Dear?* (Marriage Welfare Bureau, Toronto, 1939), *passim*. Private Collection.
3. Vivian Dowding, adapted from an interview and other conversations with the author from November 1, 1978, to March, 1984. See also Mary F. Bishop, "The Early Birth Controllers of BC," *BC Studies*, Spring, 1984. All uncited quotations are from the above interviews and conversations.
4. Some forbidden activities included under "publishing obscene matter," Section 207 of the Criminal Code of Canada, as adopted in 1892, were manufacture, sale, or distribution of any obscene book or other printed matter, or any picture or model, or any indecent show, "any means of instruction or any medicine, drug, or article represented as a means of preventing conception or of causing abortion...or an advertisement of any means, instruction, medicine, drug, or article for restoring sexual virility or curing venereal diseases or diseases of the generative organs." *Journal of the House of Commons, Dominion of Canada*, Ottawa, 1890-1892, Reel 301. The phrase "preventing conception or" was not removed from the Criminal Code until 1969. See also Mary F. Bishop, "The Politics of Abortion...Revisited," *Atlantis*, Vol. 9, No. 1, Fall, 1983: 106-117.
5. Jacques Henripin, *Trends and Factors of Fertility in Canada* (Statistics Canada Ottawa, Catalogue C599-541/1972, Information Canada, Now Ministry of Supply and Services), Table 2.3: 30. See also T.R. Balakrishnam, G.E. Ebanks, and C.P. Grindstaff, "Total Fertility Rate, 1902-1971, and Fertility Cohorts born from 1874-1938, Canada", *Patterns of Fertility in Canada*, 1971 (Catalogue 99-759E, Statistics Canada, December, 1979, Ministry of Supply and Services, Ottawa), Chart 1.1: 31; Table 1.7: 39; p.248. See also Neil Collishaw, *Fertility in Canada* (Catalogue 99-706, Bulletin 5:1-6, Statistics Canada, Ottawa, Ministry of Supply and Services, 1976), especially "Differential Fertility", 3.3; 3.4; 3.5; pp. 37-60, and "Summary and Conclusions": 61.
6. Violet McNaughton to Mrs. T.B. Wilson, Harris, Saskatchewan, May 6, 1922, June 12, 1923; McNaughton to A. Morgan, Aquadell, Saskatchewan, May 15, 1922. McNaughton Papers, Saskatchewan Archives Board.
7. For example, *Clearing in the West* (Thomas Allen, Ltd., Toronto, 1935): 208, 335. "Janey Canuck," *The Vancouver Sun*, August 27: 5; September 3: 3; September 10: 4; September 17: 2; September 24: 5; October 1: 2, 1932.
8. Mary F. Bishop, "The Early Birth Controllers of BC".
9. *Birth Control Review*, March, 1932: 93.
10. Dorothea Palmer's married name is Ferguson.
11. Kaufman did not end the program until 1976. Whether he feared more lawsuits, or was merely following business practice, Kaufman stripped his files regularly. Although he was accused of manufacturing condoms, he only briefly manufactured average size diaphragms and foam powders. Author's unpublished research.
12. Vivian Dowding, see note 3.
13. Margaret Sanger, *Family Limitation*, 1930 (14th edition). From the author's private collection.
14. *Ibid.* Dowding has described how, in 1933, a group of friends in Kamloops brought Laura Vaughan from her private clinic in Vancouver to Kamloops for a public meeting on the need for local services. They had rented another room where Vaughan fitted a number of women for diaphragms. Dowding acquired her own diaphragm at that time. See also Mary F. Bishop, "The Early Birth Controllers of

BC".

15. See note 3.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Vivian Dowding, interview with Sara Diamond, Vancouver, 1978(?) Tape 2045 B, Simon Fraser University Library, Reserve.

18. See note 3.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Muriel Tyrer, Letters to Tyrer dated December 30, 1939, January 28, 1940, respectively. Private Collection.

21. See note 3.

22. *Your Child Needs Your Help* (Marriage Welfare Bureau, Toronto, n.d. Probably 1940). Hugh Dobson Papers, Box 13, File 7, United Church Archives, Vancouver School of Theology, UBC, Vancouver, BC.

23. Anna S. Weber, RN, Parent's Information Bureau, Kitchener, Ontario, to Vivian Dowding, July 19, 1956, given to author.

24. Planned Parenthood Association of BC (formerly Society for Population Planning), minutes April 13, October 30, November 20, 1961; April 25; September 13, 1962.

25. Phillip M. Alderman, North Vancouver, interview with author, June 25, 1979.

26. See note 3.

