

## Charles Knowlton (1800–1850)

Charles Knowlton was a physician and author who advocated for increased access to information about reproduction in the nineteenth century in the US. Throughout his early medical education, Knowlton was particularly interested in anatomy and on several instances robbed graves for bodies to dissect. In 1832, Knowlton authored *The Fruits of Philosophy*, a pamphlet that contained detailed descriptions of the reproductive organs and information on conception and methods to control reproduction. Knowlton circulated his work among his patients until it was republished in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1832. For publishing a book on sex and methods of birth control, Knowlton was convicted of breaking obscenity laws, which prevented the transmission of obscene materials. After his death, social activists Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant republished his work in London, England. Knowlton's writing about sex and birth control allowed individuals to understand and take control of their reproduction and initiated a public discussion about obscenity laws.

Knowlton was born to Comfort White and Stephen Knowlton on 10 May 1800 in Templeton, Massachusetts. His father owned a farm where Knowlton worked and lived with his mother and two older brothers. In his youth, he attended school at the New Salem Academy in Salem, Massachusetts, only four months a year, two months in the summer and two months in the winter until he was seventeen years old. In his autobiography, Knowlton states that he was proficient in English grammar and math, but did not learn any spelling, geography, or history. At seventeen, Knowlton was diagnosed with gonorrhoea dormientium. In the nineteenth century, gonorrhoea dormientium classified as a sleep condition in which men dreamt of sexual encounters and experienced penile erections and discharge. He underwent treatments with several doctors, none of which gave him relief from his symptoms. In the summer of 1819, while seeking treatment for his condition in Keene, New Hampshire, his physician Charles Adams taught him Latin.

Throughout the next several years, Knowlton's health continued to fail as his gonorrhoea dormientium persisted. In his autobiography, Knowlton states that he was never in any physical pain from his condition, but rather suffered from mental and emotional anguish from the shame of his diagnosis. In 1821, Knowlton returned to Templeton to live with his parents due to his health problems. While he was home, an old neighbor Richard Stuart, whom Knowlton described as a medical electrician, offered to have Knowlton live with him and treat his condition using electric shock therapy. Knowlton stayed with Stuart and met his daughter, Tabitha, whom Knowlton later married. According to his autobiography, Knowlton's symptoms resolved when he met Tabitha and they were married on 17 April 1821, when she was seventeen years old. The couple had four children together.

After his symptoms stopped, Knowlton returned to school in October of 1821, studying medicine with a local physician, Charles Wilder. He did chores in Wilder's office for the cost of his tuition, approximately fifty cents per week. According to Knowlton, he was particularly interested in anatomy and, in January 1822, he went to a nearby graveyard and dug up a body to study its anatomy. In the US, removing bodies from graves constituted grave robbery and was illegal. Knowlton brought the body to Wilder's office, planning to dissect the body together. However, Wilder feared prosecution and instead told the guard in charge of the graveyard that Knowlton was mentally disturbed and had taken a body from a grave. The guard made Knowlton rebury the body to avoid punishment. Knowlton promised to rebury the body the next night, however, he covered up the grave and instead buried the body in a frozen pond where he could return for it later on. A few weeks later, Knowlton claims, he thawed the body and dissected it in Wilder's office, removing it before Wilder returned. During the day, Knowlton continued his formal medical education with Wilder.

In 1823, Knowlton decided to leave Templeton to attend a semester of medical lectures at Dartmouth

University in Hannover, New Hampshire. However, Knowlton was unable to afford the cost of tuition for medical school. Knowlton had heard that one could sell bodies for fifty dollars each and decided to bring a wagon to Hannover to carry a body to sell, to finance his tuition. He and another medical student who needed money to attend the lectures borrowed a wagon and a horse and stopped at a cemetery where they dug up a body to sell. However, the warm weather and rain caused the recently buried body to deteriorate, making it unsellable for dissection. Knowlton and the other student dissected and removed the bones from the corpse, planning to sell just the bones. They continued their journey to Hannover, still searching for a recently buried corpse. Nearly ten miles from Hannover, they learned of a recent burial and dug it up. Upon reaching Hannover, the professor of anatomy said that he was not currently seeking bodies as the dissections would not begin for several weeks. However, the professor paid them twenty dollars for their trouble and ordered them to bury the corpse in a casket of burnt charcoal.

Knowlton finished his semester of medical school in 1823, then traveled to Royalston, Massachusetts, to study under physician Stephen Bacheller. After a few months of living in Royalston, Knowlton and four other medical students came under suspicion for robbing another grave for a body to dissect. Knowlton was scheduled to be tried for illegal dissection later that year. While waiting for his trial, Knowlton moved to Keene, Massachusetts, where he studied with physician Amos Twitchell and was able to observe many different operations. In the fall of 1823, Knowlton returned to Dartmouth University where he completed his second course of medical lectures. Knowlton completed his medical doctorate in 1834 and wrote his dissertation on the role of dissection in medical education. Knowlton was eventually tried and convicted of grave robbing and illegal dissection. He served a two-month jail sentence in Massachusetts.

In 1829, several years after being released from prison, Knowlton self-published a book, *Elements of Modern Materialism*. In the book, Knowlton compares ideas of the body and the soul. He uses anatomical terms to describe the spirit as a nervous, electrical, and physiological phenomenon. According to historian Michael Sappol, the book was not well received by the philosophical community. The book, while not anti-religion, did not conform to any particular religion and Knowlton was criticized for being antireligious. Knowlton was unable to pay for the cost of printing his book due to his failing medical practice. He embarked on a book tour in the northeastern United States, where he lectured on physiology and anatomy, to pay for the book.

Following his tour of the East Coast, Knowlton moved to Ashfield, Massachusetts where he joined the medical practice of physician Roswell Shepard. During this time, Knowlton anonymously published a pamphlet, *The Fruits of Philosophy*, which advocated for controlling reproduction and contained instructions for preventing pregnancy. As he makes clear in *The Fruits of Philosophy*, Knowlton was motivated by Neo-Malthusian ideas. Neo-Malthusians subscribed to the idea that population control was a key factor in the success of the human population. In *The Fruits of Philosophy*, Knowlton argues that families who limit their reproduction via some method of birth control will ultimately be happier. He further argues that families are obligated to use some form of birth control to limit overall population growth.

Knowlton circulated *The Fruits of Philosophy* and its birth control instructions among his patients beginning in 1830. However, he had few patients and therefore the work was not widely read. Shortly after, Abner Kneeland a theologian and social radical in Boston, Massachusetts, republished the work with Knowlton's name on the cover. The republished work circulated widely and sold well. Following the second publication of *The Fruits of Philosophy*, Knowlton was persecuted by religious people in his town who did not agree with the public discussion of sex or the practice of birth control. The government charged Knowlton under the United States obscenity laws, which classified the discussion of sex and contraception as obscene. He was convicted and ultimately sentenced to three months of hard labor. He was charged again after Mason Grosvenor, a minister in Ashfield, found the pamphlet and took legal action against Knowlton. But ultimately the charges were dropped.

In Ashfield, Knowlton wrote several case histories for the *Boston Medical & Surgical Journal*, including documentation of his own experience with gonorrhea dormientium. He practiced medicine in Ashfield until his death on 20 February 1850, at the age of forty-nine. Twenty-seven years after Knowlton's death, activists Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh republished *The Fruits of Philoso-*

phy in England, where it was very popular.

## Sources

1. Knowlton, Charles. *Fruits of Philosophy: A Treatise on the Population Question*. Eds. Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant. San Francisco: The Reader's Library, 1891. <https://archive.org/details/fruitsphilosoph00knogoog> (Accessed August 17, 2017).
2. Knowlton, Charles. *Elements of Modern Materialism*. Adams: Self-Published, 1829. <https://archive.org/details/elementsofmodern00know>
3. Knowlton, Charles. *The Fruits of Philosophy: The Private Companion for Young Married People*. London: James Watson, 1832.
4. Sappol, Michael. "The Odd Case of Charles Knowlton: Anatomical Performance, Medical Narrative, and Identity in Antebellum America." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 83 (2009): 460-98.
5. Knowlton, Charles. "The Late Charles Knowlton, M.D." *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 45 (1851): 109-20.
6. "The Legacies of Two Dartmouth Doctors: Charles Knowlton, DMS 1824: The Father of Birth Control." *Dartmouth Medicine Magazine, Web Extras*. [http://dartmed.dartmouth.edu/winter09/html/most\\_unspeakable\\_terror\\_we/biographies.php](http://dartmed.dartmouth.edu/winter09/html/most_unspeakable_terror_we/biographies.php) (Accessed August 25, 2017).