

Constructing a Purpose for Menstruation During the Nineteenth Century

Knowing that our contemporary understanding of the purpose of menstruation is less than 150 years old, I set out to pin-point the moment in the mid-to-late nineteenth century when this theory emerged (indicated by the red and yellow arrow).

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I explored the history of medical thought leading up to the appearance of this new theory, and the rival theories that ultimately gave way to it.
Sources: Medical periodicals, Gynaecological, Physiological and Anatomical textbooks, Midwifery guides.



Plethora

- Menstruation as a venting of excess blood
- A phenomenon not specific to women but occurring more frequently in women than in men

Neurological Control: Menstruation as controlled by nervous sympathy between the uterus and the brain



Ovular

- Ovulation recently discovered
- Ovulation causes menstruation
- Ovulation and menstruation occur simultaneously
- Menstruation is analogous to the 'heat' periods of animals

Tyler Smith, *Manual of Obstetrics* (1858)

"The old view that ovulation is the cause of menstruation is ... no longer tenable" (Walter Heape, 1894)

Ovular & Denudation

- The uterine epithelium sheds (denudes) during menstruation
- Ovulation and menstruation are still simultaneous

- Menstruation as a consequence of the non-implantation of a fertilised ovum.

Mary Putnam Jacobi, 'The Question of Rest for Women During Menstruation' (1878)

Non-ovular denudation A

- Menstruation as the preparation of the uterus for implantation

Robert Lawson Tait, *Diseases of Women and Abdominal Surgery* (1889)

Non-ovular denudation B

