

Utah's Premarital Exam: A political and cultural perspective

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Disclosures

- No financial disclosures
- This talk is about women
 - I recognize that many of these issues also affect men, transgender, and gender non-conforming individuals

I'm sorry, a premarital what?

[Health Care Home](#) / [Women's Health](#) / [Gynecology](#)

GETTING READY FOR YOUR WEDDING NIGHT WITH A PREMARITAL EXAM

[801-213-2995](tel:801-213-2995) or

[REQUEST AN APPOINTMENT >](#)

[Refer a Patient >](#)

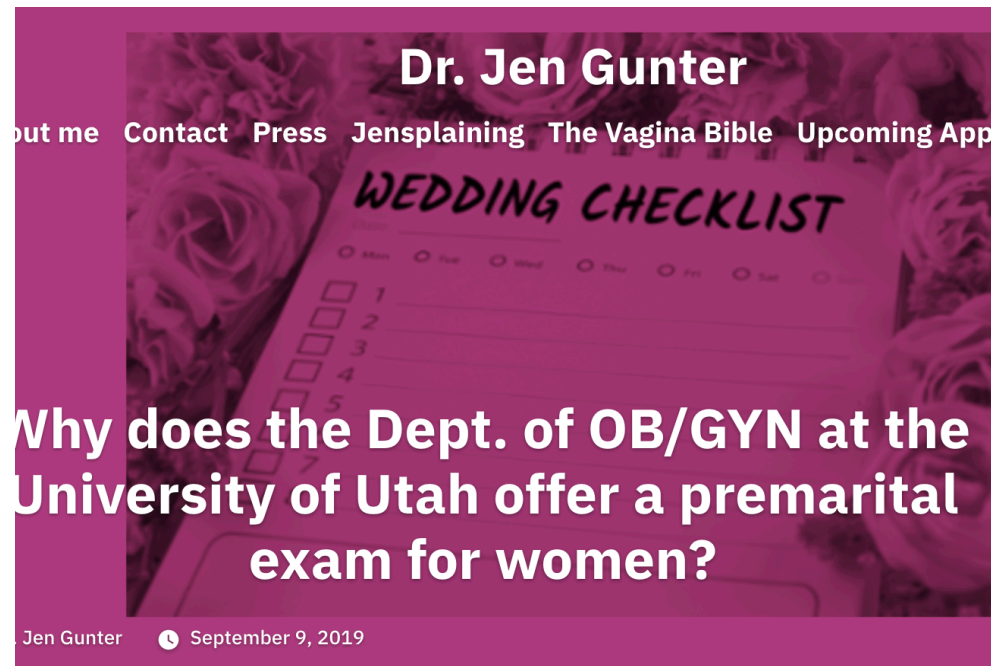
WHAT IS A PREMARITAL EXAM?

Getting ready for your wedding night can be a nerve-racking experience for anyone—especially if it will be the first time you've had sex.

Whether you're postponing sexual activity for religious, cultural, or personal reasons, it's normal to have anxiety before your first time. A "premarital exam" can help you prepare physically and emotionally.

“There is no side eye that is side eye enough for this atrocity.
It is all sorts of wrong.”

- Overt misogyny
- No equivalent exam for men
- Implication that a vagina needs “medical prepping” for sex
- Propagation of outdated, heteronormative notions of virginity



The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Health

'Premarital exams' for women are popular in Utah. Some experts say they send a bad message.



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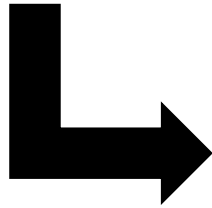


<https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2019/10/23/premarital-exams-women-are-popular-utah-some-experts-say-they-send-bad-message/>

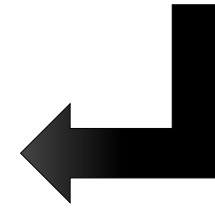
Politics



Culture



Utah Values



Demand for
Premarital Exams

Objective

1. Explain why the premarital exam exists
2. Culturally sensitive care
3. How medical professionals can advocate for change



A story...

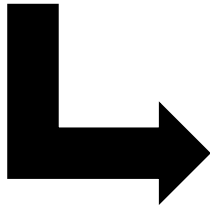
Values reflected in the premarital exam

1. There is a time and place for sex (marriage)
2. Propagation of potentially harmful sexual norms to women, by women
3. Women are not the only agents consenting to their sexual activity
4. There is a right way to have sex
5. There is acceptance of a “success sequence” to sexual activity

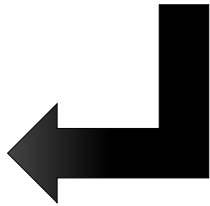
Politics

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Culture



Utah Values



Demand for
Premarital Exams

Value #1 Time and place for sex = marriage

Premarital Exam

Politics: Sexual education

- Utah sexual education is “abstinence-based” (and opt-in)
 - Emphasize abstinence before marriage
 - Allow limited discussion on contraception to prevent STDs and pregnancy
- Comprehensive sexual education:
 - Benefits of abstinence
 - How to obtain and use condoms
 - Gender and sexuality
 - Consent

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

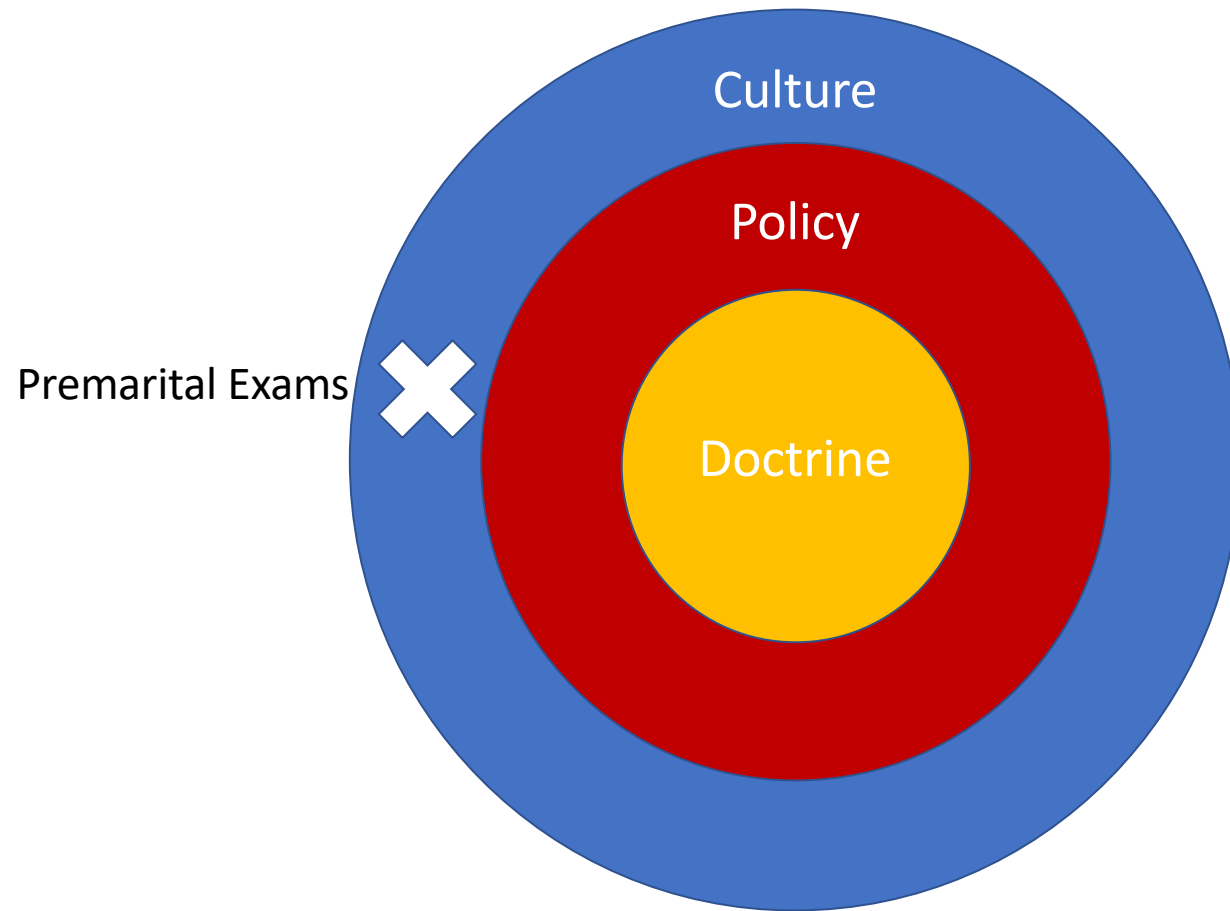
Dominates policy and culture

- 68.5% of Utah population
- Nearly 90% members of Utah state legislature



¹ <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/facts-and-statistics/state/utah>

² <https://www.sitrib.com/news/politics/2019/01/21/who-has-bigger/>



Culture: The Law of Chastity



- Sexual purity before marriage
- Complete fidelity to one's spouse after marriage

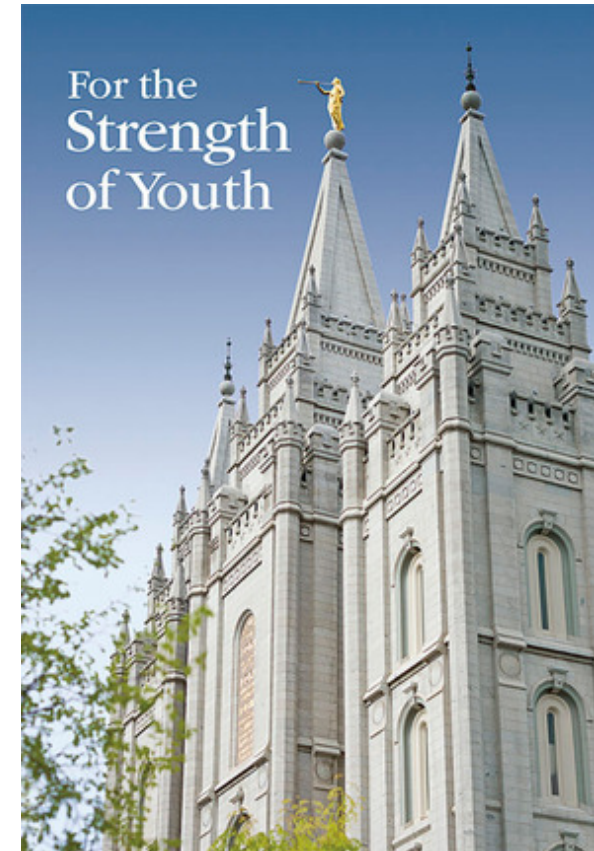
Violations are “...more serious than any other sins except murder”
- Alma 39:5 (The Book of Mormon)

Chastity in practice

- Delay dating until age 16
- Avoid impure thoughts, “passionate kissing”, intercourse
- Modesty in dress (mostly women)
- Avoiding pornography or media that can “arouse sexual feelings”



<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/chastity?lang=eng>



Discourages more than sexual behavior before marriage...

- Essential sexual health discussions amongst family and friends
- Self examination and exploration
- General knowledge of sexual mechanics and contraception

There may be a lot of shocking “firsts” during a premarital exam

- Potential for embarrassment, anxiety and misperceptions

Clinical Pearl #1: Take it slow, keep it basic

- What do you know about your own anatomy?
 - Use a mirror!
- What questions do you have about sex?
- Normalize medical vocabulary
- Respect modesty
- Anticipate embarrassment and/or discomfort with pelvic exams
- Create a non-judgmental space for even the most basic questions

Value #2 Propagation of potentially harmful sexual norms to women, by women

A patient walks into your office requesting documentation of virginity...

“Part of me is like, I’ll sign whatever you need me to sign for your wedding. But then a part of me is like, I scientifically can’t say if you’re a virgin based on your hymen, but I just believe you because you’re my patient”

– Dr. Morgan Scaglione

A dilemma

- Women are socialized to operate within the parameters of a highly patriarchal system
- Survival sometimes requires acting in ways that reinforce patriarchal ideals
- Premarital exams are promoted by female authority figures...which is why they have persisted into the 21st century!

Politics: Sex education

A patriarchal society is reinforced through sex education that stigmatizes female sexuality

Funnels...

INTIMACY FUNNEL

Holding Hands
Kissing
Making out
Petting
Intercourse

COMMITMENT FUNNEL

Dating
Going steady
Courtship
Engagement
Marriage

- Must use approved lesson materials
- Check out UEN.org

4. Girls and guys will use one funnel to bargain for the other **Girls give sex to get love, guys give love to get sex.** (Teacher note: This statement makes a great poster for your classroom.)

<https://www.uen.org/lessonplan/view/12368>

This type of sexual education...

- Conditions youth to accept and internalize sexist attitudes about themselves
- And reinforces the notion that women are not inherently sexual...and thus require a premarital exam
 - Learn what is second nature to men
 - Ensure equipped for sexual activity

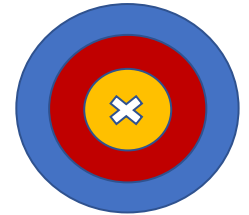


Culture

Adherence to, and defense of, a strict religious and gendered hierarchy leads to the propagation of potentially harmful beliefs about women, by women

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/221668>

Gender roles within the LDS church

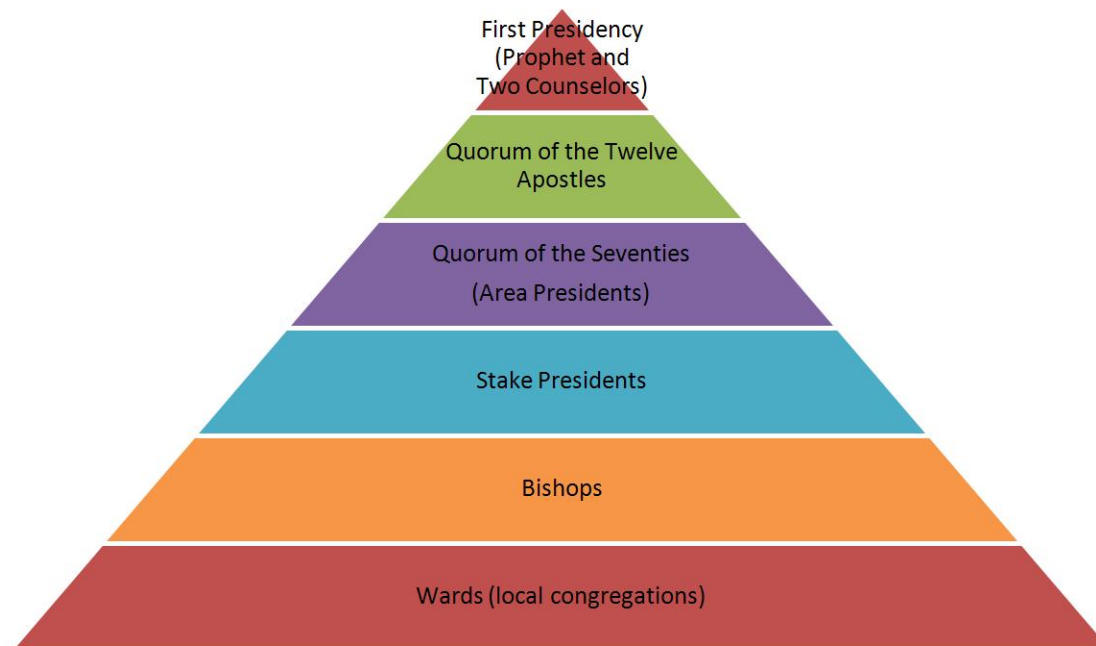


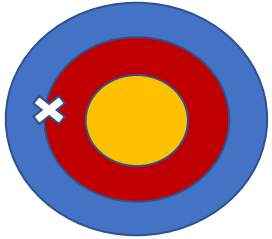
- Gender is an eternal characteristic
 - Women bear and nurture children
 - Men hold the Priesthood and preside over family and church
- Men and women are equal and cannot obtain exaltation without each other



<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world/the-family-a-proclamation-to-the-world?lang=eng>

Patriarchal authority structure





“Mormons defeated the ERA by merely flexing their considerable organizational muscle”

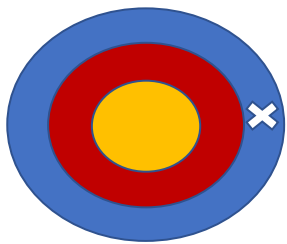
- Neil Young, *“The ERA is a Moral Issue”*



Politics: Utah Eagle Forum and Pro-Life Utah

“They’ve finally found the best
smokescreen for their chauvinism:
women”

- Hulu’s “Mrs. America”



A patient walks into your office requesting documentation of virginity...

What are you going to do???

- Stand up to the patriarchy or acquiesce to it?

Answer is probably somewhere in the middle...

- Help women exercise autonomy within the parameters of a patriarchal system

Clinical Pearl #2: Value-neutral counseling

- “Some people believe _____, others believe _____”
- “From a medical perspective studies show _____”
- “My job isn’t to tell you what to do or what is right, my job is to give you the information you need to discover what is best for you, your body and your relationships”
- “Many people find it helpful to also discuss these questions with trusted adults such as _____”

Value #3 Women are not the only agents consenting to their sexual activity

Other agents include

- Religious leaders acting as gatekeepers of religious rites and spiritual guides
 - Especially for unmarried women!
- Sexual partners (or perpetrators) not adequately taught consent
- Medical providers assessing the physical and emotional preparedness for sex

Culture: LDS Bishops

- Preside over “wards”
- Lay clergy
 - Minimal formal training
- First step in receiving a temple recommend



Bishops enforce when and how a woman is sexually active

- Seen as counselors and spiritual guides
- Hear confessions with minimal to no formal training in sexual and reproductive health
- Controversial interviews alone with minors and women
- Conversion therapy for LGBTQ members (in the past)



Politics: No requirement to teach consent

“I as a young boy didn’t know what to call what she had done. I know now it was sexual assault...You cannot assume children and teens are learning consent at home”

- Adam Herbst, 17, testifying before the Utah House Education Committee

https://siecus.org/state_profile/utah-state-profile/

Some statistics

- 1 in 3 Utah women will experience some form of sexual violence
- Rape is the only violent crime in Utah that occurs at a higher rate than the rest of the nation
- 1 in 11 Utah students forced to do sexual things they did not want to do



<https://health.utah.gov/vipp/teens/rape-sexual-assault/>

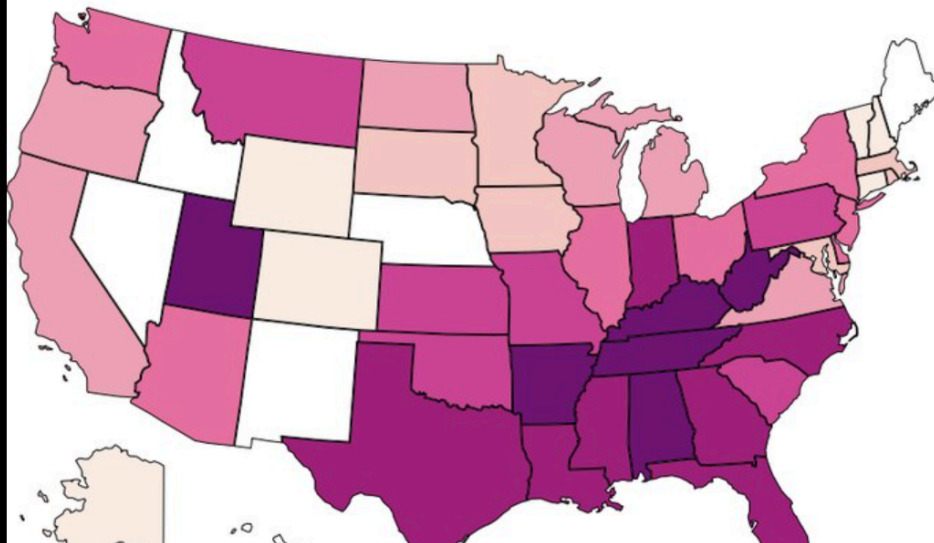
<https://www.ncsl.org/research/health/state-policies-on-sex-education-in-schools.aspx>

Utah is the second-most sexist state, researchers say — and women’s internalized sexism appears to play a unique role here

The geography of sexism

Prevalence of stereotypical beliefs about a woman's place in society

Less sexism  More sexism  Insufficient data



Ad closed by Google

Utah ranked worst state for women's equality three years in a row



Ad closed by Google

<https://wallethub.com/edu/best-and-worst-states-for-women-equality/5835>

Why the sexual violence?

- Violence is highest in states where women and men were the most unequal
- Domination of men in family, politics, economy and social institutions

Yodanis CL. Gender Inequality, Violence Against Women, and Fear: A Cross-National Test of the Feminist Theory of Violence Against Women. *J Interpers Violence*. 2004;19(6):655-675. doi:10.1177/0886260504263868

Back to the premarital exam...

Men have dominated the political and cultural dialogue in this state for so long that the forces acting to sexually disenfranchise women persist, even in medicine.

Clinical Pearl #3: Abolish or transform the premarital exam??

“If a woman who plans to partner with men has apprehension about her first coitus what she (and her prospective partner) needs is quality sex education and a discussion about consent. She doesn’t need her OB/GYN reinforcing patriarchal tropes and medically incorrect information”.

– Dr. Jenn Gunter

<https://drjengunter.com/2019/09/09/why-does-the-dept-of-ob-gyn-at-the-university-of-utah-offer-a-premarital-exam-for-women/>

Clinical Pearl #3: Abolish or transform the premarital exam??

A better premarital exam:

- Focus on education
- Safe place for questions
- Evidence-based care
- Value-neutral counseling

Value #4 There is a right way to have sex

- Vaginal dilators
- “Virginal” vs “marital” hymen
- What’s up with the hymen obsession?
- Phallogentric



Vaginal Dilators



What Does a Premarital Exam Include?

A typical premarital exam includes a brief health history, a complete physical exam, discussion of birth control options, and a brief overview of intercourse and foreplay. A pelvic exam is done to determine if there is a need for dilators.

When Should I Schedule a Premarital Exam?

A pre-marital exam should be scheduled at least one month before your wedding day. However, two to three months before is preferable. We recommend calling to make an appointment as soon as you are engaged.

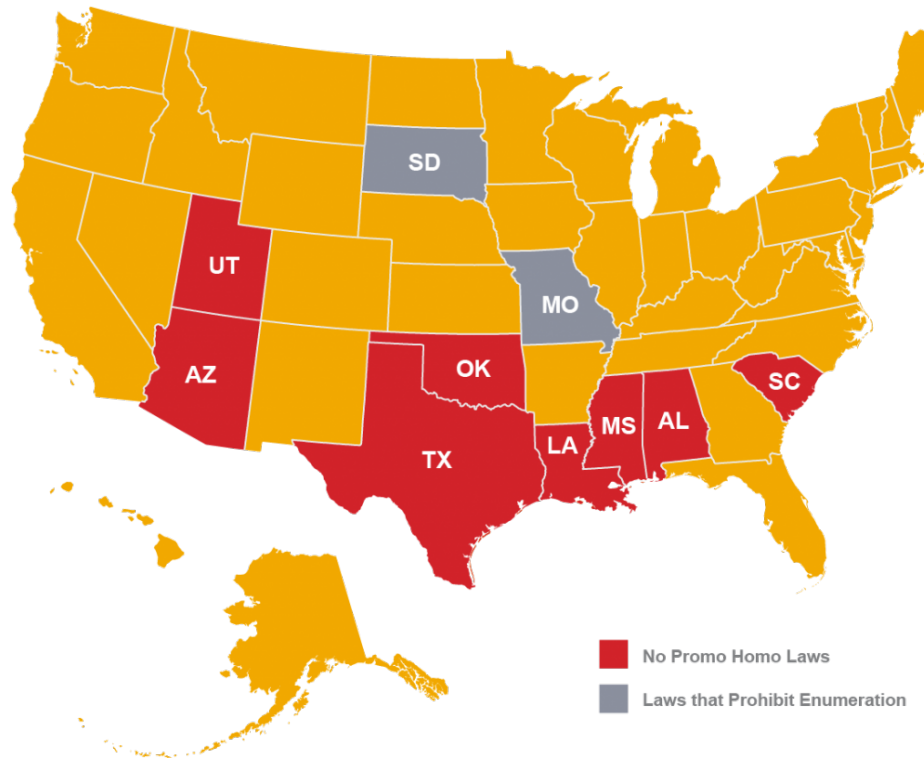
<https://valleywomenshealth.com/premarital-exam-faq/>

Value #4 There is a right way to have sex

- Vaginal dilators
- “Virginal” vs “marital” hymen
- What’s up with the hymen obsession?
- Phallocentric



NO PROMO HOMO LAWS & LAWS THAT PROHIBIT ENUMERATIO



Politics: “No Promo Homo” Law

- Repealed 2016
- Prohibited educators from discussing homosexuality in a positive way
- Enabled abuse and discrimination in schools

Experience of LGBTQ students in Utah schools:

Lacey T: “[The teacher] said, ‘How do we avoid getting pregnant?’ and you can say anything. And I said, ‘Have sex with someone of the same sex,’ and I got kicked out of class.”

Damien N: “The only time they mentioned homosexuality in high school was to say that if you’re homosexual you’d get AIDS.”

Gabriella B: “If you’re gay, and you’re being taught all this stuff that’s irrelevant to you, you just don’t pay attention.”

Thoreson RR. *“Like Walking through a Hailstorm”: Discrimination against LGBT Youth in US Schools*. Human Rights Watch; 2016.



Culture: LDS Church and LGBTQ members

- “distorts loving relationships”
- Possible increase in youth suicide rates
- 70% LGBTQ members met criteria for PTSD

<https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/chastity?lang=eng>
<https://archive.slttrib.com/article.php?id=3473487&itype=CMSID>
Simmons BW. COMING OUT MORMON: AN EXAMINATION OF RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION, SPIRITUAL TRAUMA, AND PTSD AMONG MORMON AND EX-MORMON LGBTQQA ADULTS. :216.



Back to the premarital exam

When individuals are socialized to believe their first foray into gynecology should be before a heterosexual marriage, it leaves queer and transgender individuals at the margins of care.

Clinical Pearl #4.1: Rebrand the premarital exam

- Call it a sexual health visit
- Available to people of all gender, sexuality and relationship status
- LGBTQ youth are a particularly high-risk group

Clinical Pearl #4.2: Prepare for vaginal dilator requests

- Most vaginas don't need dilating!
- Explain purpose of dilators, particularly in context of vaginismus
- Correct myths about the hymen

Value #5: Acceptance of a “success sequence” to sexual activity

Political enforcement of the “success sequence”

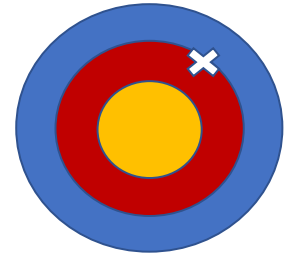
- Schools cannot teach
 - “The intricacies of intercourse, sexual stimulation or erotic behavior”
 - “The advocacy of premarital or extramarital sexual activity”
 - “The advocacy or encouragement of the use of contraceptive methods or devices (except as it relates to effectiveness, limitations or risks)”
- 9% Utah high schools taught how to correctly use a condom

<https://le.utah.gov/~2018/bills/static/HB0286.html>

https://siecus.org/state_profile/utah-state-profile/

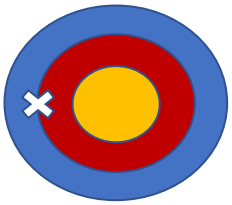
Cultural enforcement of the “success sequence”

- High stake consequences of sexually deviant behavior



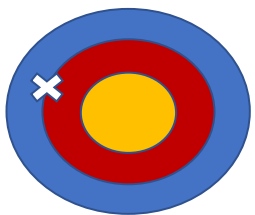
Temples

- Cannot attend weddings
- Waiting to get married
- ...everyone knows you had sex



Reluctance to disclose sexual assault

- Reluctance to disclose sexual assault



Have you ever thought you would be better off dead or had thoughts of hurting yourself because of your sexual behavior?

- 9.2% of respondents said yes
- 1.4% said they had attempted to end their life

Survey of 1450 LDS members aged 18-50

Unique
vocabulary...

- Docking, marinating, soaking, durling, parking
- Oral is moral
- Poop hole loop-hole
- Short marriages in Las Vegas

...but still at risk of STDs or pregnancy



Back to the premarital exam

- Premarital exam is a step in the “success sequence”
- Culturally enforced by high-stake consequences of sexually deviant behavior
- Politically reinforced through limited sexual education
- Leads to
 - Misclassification of high-risk sexual behavior
 - Insufficient knowledge of risks

Clinical Pearl #5: What does sex mean to you?

- Emphasize confidentiality and explain the purpose of a sexual history
 - This will NOT make it back to your parents or bishop!
- Screen for sexual assault
 - Incentivized to hide it
- Screen for depression and suicidal ideation
 - There is a lot of shame around even healthy sexuality

Recognition of knowledge gaps and respect for medically sound advice

Premarital exams can be valuable places for women to learn accurate information about their bodies and sexual potential

Culture: A premarital exam ethnography

- Women felt doctors were the only place they could find medically accurate information
 - Can't trust the internet
 - Don't want to talk to Mom
 - Peers are too inexperienced
- Knew they lacked critical information

Politics: Medical accuracy in sex ed is required by law!

- “Verified or supported by a body of research...peer-review and recognized as accurate...by professional organizations...with expertise in the relevant field...”
- Committees reviewing sex ed curricula “...shall include parents, health professionals, school health educators, and administrators”.

<https://rules.utah.gov/publicat/code/r277/r277-474.htm>

In the exam room and beyond: A call to action

As a parent, sibling or relative:

- Contact your local school board and advocate for lessons on
 - Consent
 - Sexual orientation
 - Gender identity
 - Contraception
 - Reproductive anatomy

In the exam room and beyond: A call to action

As a member of our Utah community:

- Encourage your local representative
 - To support comprehensive sexual education
 - Require sexual health questions on YRBS survey

In the exam room and beyond: A call to action

As a member or friend of the LDS church, advocate for:

- Increased training for LDS bishops regarding sexual health and premarital counseling
 - Especially bishops of singles wards
- Updated, evidence-based resources for
 - Teaching sexual education in the home
 - Maintaining sexual health for both married and unmarried members
- Teaching consent (in addition to refusal skills) to youth

In the exam room and beyond: A call to action

As experts in human sexuality and women's health

- Remember, our opinion carries significant weight to lawmakers and educators
- Review approved sex-ed lesson plans for medical accuracy
- Advocate for comprehensive sex education

In the exam room and beyond: A call to action

As members of an academic medical center

- Research
 - Identify the unique needs of our community
 - Present evidence that legislative and religious policies are harming citizens
- Outreach
 - Advocate for evidence-based premarital exams throughout the state
 - Stop inappropriately prescribing vaginal dilators!
 - Publicly available resource supplementing premarital exams occurring elsewhere
 - Public health campaign dispelling hymen myths

But how can we change the culture?

Stories.

Wrap-up

1. Political and cultural forces behind the premarital exam
2. Culturally sensitive care
3. How medical professionals can advocate for change

“Sexual health visits” available for EVERYONE!

Acknowledgements

- Jen Kaiser
- Annabel Sheinberg and the Planned Parenthood Community Health Educators (Ocean Candler and Medalid DelCarpio)
- Mom (and Dad), Alexandra Ahern, Marion House, Morgan Scaglione, Madison Harmer
- Co-residents, Natalie Moore, Julie Gainer

Questions?

5 things you can do in your next premarital exam (besides talk about contraception)

1. Use a mirror!
2. Teach how to use a condom
3. Correct misperceptions about the hymen
4. Discuss consent and her right to assert what she wants/needs from a partner
5. Provide evidence-based, value-neutral resources for later reference and learning

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