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**'SHADOW OVER NEW ZEALAND': THE
RESPONSE TO VENEREAL DISEASE IN
NEW ZEALAND 1910 - 1945**

**A thesis presented in fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
History at Massey University**

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ABSTRACT

The period from 1910 to 1945 saw the topic of venereal disease become an increasingly public one as politicians, health administrators and other interested groups attempted to formulate an effective response to the menace which it was believed that these diseases posed to the national health.

This thesis sets out to explore how New Zealand responded to the 'threat' of venereal disease in this period and to examine the tensions which accompanied this. The major source of friction was the anxiety of some women's groups - and in particular the Women's Christian Temperance Union - that Government moves to 'toughen up' the existing venereal disease legislation threatened the civil liberties of the nation's women and signalled a return to the one-sided contagious diseases legislation of the previous century.

After charting this response it examines the anxieties, aspirations and assumptions which helped to shape initiatives on venereal disease and to define the boundaries within which debate on the issue took place and within which socially and morally acceptable solutions were formulated. It suggests that the high level of concern with the issue of venereal disease in this period was not due solely to medical factors but was a response to social change including changes in the relationship between the sexes, the behaviour of the young and new

developments in the field of popular culture. To protagonists, debate on the venereal disease issue offered a chance to articulate these anxieties and an opportunity to highlight the social cost of the alleged moral decline of the nation. Analysis of the episode also suggests that these concerns were heightened by aspirations about New Zealand society and the desire to avoid the ills of the 'old world'.

Analysis of the period also suggests that while the years from 1910 to 1945 witnessed change in the medical treatment of these diseases, there was considerable continuity in attitudes towards the issue. In particular there was a persistent nervousness about the promotion of prophylaxis and about public discussion on the subject. Explanations for this nervousness are examined in the second part of the thesis.

The thesis concludes by critically examining the theoretical apparatus which some commentators have used to analyse the topic abroad. It suggests that attempts to portray a clash between moral and medical viewpoints are not appropriate to the New Zealand experience and reflect, instead, the assumptions of modern observers. It also suggests that attempts by feminist historians to portray initiatives on venereal disease as a crude attempt to impose social control on women risk distorting contemporary reality and ignoring the complexities of the contemporary context.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AI&M	Auckland Institute and Museum
<u>A.J.H.R.</u>	<u>Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives</u>
<u>N.Z.P.D.</u>	<u>New Zealand Parliamentary Debates</u>
<u>N.Z.S.</u>	<u>New Zealand Statutes</u>
<u>WR</u>	<u>White Ribbon</u>
WTu	Alexander Turnbull Library

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