A vaginal speculum is a medical device that allows physicians and health providers to better view a woman’s cervix and vagina during pelvic exams. Most specula are made of metal and plastic, and physicians insert a portion of the speculum into the patient’s vagina to separate the vaginal walls. Physicians have used devices to view inside a woman’s vagina for centuries, but physicians did not begin using what is known as a speculum in the twenty-first century until the 1800s. Prior to the invention of the modern speculum, health specialists struggled to find a way to view the cervix and vaginal walls. Because of that, health specialists could not accurately diagnose medical problems that were occurring in those tissues. Therefore, the speculum has enabled healthcare professionals to provide women with better gynecological diagnoses and care.

As of 2019, gynecologists routinely use the speculum for vaginal examinations. According to the Mayo Clinic, cervical and vaginal examinations are important in identifying abnormalities in a woman’s reproductive anatomy, such as cysts and cancers. Many women report that exams involving specula are notoriously physically and occasionally psychologically uncomfortable, mainly because of how invasive the procedure is and how the device feels inside a woman’s body. Women throughout history have claimed that usage of specula can be painful, though physicians take measures to minimize patient discomfort when performing vaginal exams with a speculum in the twenty-first century.

Prior to the 1800s, physicians used vaginal speculum-like devices for a variety of purposes in medicine. According to gynecologist Anthony Tizzano, physicians would use similar devices to cauterize wounds inside the vagina and to apply leeches to the cervical tissues for the purposes of bloodletting, or the historic practice of removing a patient’s blood for supposed therapeutic purposes. Prior to the 1800s, speculum designs were heavy and bulky, and some women found them to be uncomfortable. Most speculum devices were made of metal that, when placed inside a woman’s body, could cause pain from pinching the vaginal tissue.

In 1845, James Marion Sims opened a private makeshift hospital for slave owners to bring slave women in Montgomery, Alabama. While practicing, he treated many women who had fistulas, which are holes that form between the bladder or rectum and the vagina, causing urine and feces to enter the vagina. Women can sometimes get fistulas after long or difficult childbirths due to the neonate adding increased pressure on the vaginal walls. Women can also get fistulas caused by surgical procedures, certain forms of pelvic cancers, and prolonged, untreated urinary tract infections. Sims used a bent spoon that he inserted inside a woman’s vagina to better view the cervix and medical abnormalities. Sims named that device the Sims Speculum, which was one of the first examples of a modern speculum and is still used by some physicians in the twenty-first century. Sims stated in his unfinished autobiography that if there was anything he hated, it was investigating the organs of the female pelvis.

According to women’s health expert Margarete Sandelowski, after Sims popularized one of the first speculum models, it caused a debate within the medical community on the ethics of viewing a woman’s reproductive organs. In 1850, physicians from the Medicine and Chirurgical Society of London in London, United Kingdom, attended a meeting to debate arguments for and against the use of the speculum in gynecology, with some worrying that female patients would mistake examinations for a sexual experience. Sandelowski states that some doctors and members in the United States thought that exposing a woman’s body could corrupt women, or cause them to become obsessed with sex, and then become prostitutes. According to professor and obstetrics researcher Terri Kapsalis, during the mid 1800s, some women linked vaginal exams with prostitution and indecency and police would use pelvic exams as threats when arresting sex workers. Kapsalis claims that some people thought the speculum to function as a torture device, others thought of it as a disciplinary device, and some thought of it as a device that could cause women to become obsessed with sexual intercourse. The lattermost group included some physicians of the nineteenth century, including Robert Brudenell Carter. He discussed what he claimed were the consequences of the speculum in his book, On the Pathology and Treatment of Hysteria, in 1853. Carter claimed that in his experience as a physician, he had seen young, unmarried, middle-class women become the moral and mental equivalent to prostitutes from repeated use of the speculum and would continuously ask for examinations.

In 1870, Edward Gabriel Cusco revised Sims’s speculum, inventing the signature duckbill design that physicians continued to use into the twenty-first century. In 1878, physician Thomas Graves built upon Cusco’s design to include two curved metal blades
Physicians, some physicians require pelvic exams, usually with a speculum, before prescribing contraceptives. Because there is unnecessarily raise healthcare costs. Pelvic exams can be conducted by a physician with one's hands. However, specula

In 2014, members of the American College of Physicians recommended against performing pelvic examinations using a speculum in asymptomatic, non-pregnant women, not including Pap smears and screening for cervical cancer. They made that conclusion claiming that routine exams using a speculum can cause unnecessary discomfort for the female patient and unnecessarily raise healthcare costs. Pelvic exams can be conducted by a physician with one’s hands. However, specula enable doctors to view the inside of a woman’s reproductive tract that is not usually visible. According to the American College of Physicians, some physicians require pelvic exams, usually with a speculum, before prescribing contraceptives. Because there is
no evidence to support that requirement, some medical groups advise physicians against necessary pelvic screening before prescription in asymptomatic women. Physicians use the speculum routinely in the twenty-first century, and while they are better designed to decrease pain than previously in history, many women still claim that they do not enjoy vaginal speculum exams.

Sources


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