

QUINTUPLET AND SEXTUPLET BIRTHS IN THE UNITED STATES

by
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In the course of study and publication¹ of various aspects of natality and birth statistics, the writer has had occasion to unearth and compile the reports and records of quintuplet and sextuplet births which have occurred in the United States. Seventeen cases of such quintuplet births have been found, mostly well attested; and five of sextuplets, two well attested and three not completely verified.

The source, character, and reliability of the information on which the records of quintuple and other high multiple births are based are matters for careful consideration and evaluation.

Of the 17 quintuplet cases here reported 12 may be accepted as well verified: either on the authority of the attending physicians by their reports published in medical journals, by formal certification of the births to public registries of vital statistics, and statements obtained by personal correspondence. Most of the cases were reported in the newspapers; but such accounts, especially of local and contemporary cases, publicised by responsible newspapers and news-gathering agencies, may usually with due discrimination be accepted as quite reliable, especially when substantiated by photographs or verifiable from other sources. The information concerning one case is derived from a newspaper account which there is no reason to question; two of the cases (1826) were reported in a high-class newspaper nearly a year later from the physician's old records; one news story is quite hearsay in character; and one case is based on family statements lacking in specific details.

In the entire official registration of births in the United States to 1949 only two cases of quintuplets have been formally reported; some other cases failed of proper registra-

¹ Articles by the Author:

The sex composition of human families. *American Anthropologist*, 1905, VII, 24-36.

The numerical proportions of the sexes at birth. *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association*, 1907, I, 245-300.

Quintuplets and fecundity. *Medical Annals of the District of Columbia*, 1950, XIX, 601-607.

Statistics of births in the United States. *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 1952, LXIV, 376-381.

Plural births in the United States. *Western Journal of Surgery, Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 1953, LXI, 229-236.

tion, while those in which all of the infants were born dead do not appear in the statistics. All of the cases in the past 45 years which were not otherwise satisfactorily authenticated were verified by personal correspondence with and statements from the attending physicians or members of the families. Other cases of quintuplet births doubtless have occurred in the country that failed of public report and record or have eluded search.

Of the United States cases of quintuplets, 3 occurred in Kentucky; 2 each in New York, Pennsylvania, and North Carolina; and 1 each in the District of Columbia, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and an unknown State. Five of the cases were colored, a disproportionate number. One well attested case of sextuplets occurred in Illinois, and one in Missouri. In addition there have been 2 quintuplet cases in Canada. There has been greater frequency of reports of the cases in recent years, doubtless attributable to increase in the population and greater completeness in reporting the cases.

A ratio of the frequency of quintuplet births frequently quoted is one such case in 54,000,000 confinements. This figure is derived from Hellin's formula (1 : 864). That formula, which has been generally accepted without question or criticism, agrees roughly with the actual statistics for twins, triplets, and quadruplets; but for quintuplets it appears a gross underestimate. In the United States the actual statistics show that the approximate frequency of quintuplet births has been about one case in 9,000,000 births. In the last 54,000,000 births in the United States, over a period of about 18 years, there have occurred 6 unquestionable cases of quintuplet births, besides one of sextuplets. These would average one case of quintuplets in about 9,000,000 confinements: one about every three years. Of *sextuplets* there was one additional case in the 54,000,000 births.

The generality of plural births are most numerous in the upper age range of the childbearing period, 35-39 years. Except for some excess in the highest age group, the incidence of quintuplet births has been rather uniform at the different ages, even at the beginning of the child-bearing period. Thus, in 38 miscellaneous cases of quintuplet births in America and elsewhere, the age of the mothers at the time of birth was given as follows:

Age	Number of cases	Age	Number of cases
18	1	30	4
19		31	
		32	
20	1	33	2
21	2	34	2
22	2		
23	1	35	4
24	2	36	3
		37	
25	1	38	1
26	1	39	2
27	2		
28	4	40	3
29			
Sextuplet births:			
21	1	36	3

Following are presented the detailed records of quintuplet and sextuplet births found reported in the United States and Canada. References are given to the original sources of information, omitting those to the many secondary citations to and quotations from the originals.

Quintuplet births in the United States

1, 2. 1826, Kelly quintuplets (two cases), Pennsylvania. The *New York Times* for June 9, 1935, page 5, published an account of a remarkable case of plural births, derived from the records of Dr. James Magoffin, Jr., a pioneer physician of Mercer County, Pennsylvania; one of his grandchildren was a physician, and therefore supposably in position to have furnished reliable data. According to the old records Mrs. John Kelly about 1826 gave birth to two sets of quintuplets within twelve months of each other, and a pair of twins eight months later. In her previous residence in New York she had borne triplets. The infants were premature and died soon after birth. The mother died soon after the birth of the twins. While this case may not be rigorously confirmed, such is the record.

3. 1828, Paddock's case. In a report of an Irish case of quintuplets, published in the *London Lancet* for February 8, 1840 (volume for 1839-40, I, 743), the author in referring to other cases stated: « We have the details of another, which took place in Franklin County, in America, about twelve years ago, recorded by Doctor Paddock ». Also, « In the American case the mother was an Irish woman, and had recently arrived in America ». The writer evidently had access to a report of this case by Dr. Paddock; but the latter's account has not been found. There was then a Franklin County in no less than 17 of the United States.

4. Bushnell quintuplets, 1872. Following the birth of sextuplets in 1866 (see details below) the marvelous Mrs. James A. Bushnell is claimed to have given birth to triplets and quintuplets, non-surviving. This would probably have been in the 1870's in Buffalo, New York. Specific confirmation and details are lacking, but the occurrence of these births is positively asserted by responsible members of the family in position to know.

5. 1875, Kanouse quintuplets, Wisconsin. Mrs. Edna B. Kanouse of Watertown, Wisconsin, age 22, mother of one previous child, gave birth on February 13, 1875, to 5 boys, normally developed. One, much smaller than the others, was stillborn; the others died within three hours after birth. One placenta. The physician, Dr. T. H. Vesty, was delayed by a snow storm until after the birth. The mother bore a normal daughter a few years later. An account of the case, with photographs of the infants and birth certificate, was published in the *Watertown Democrat* March 4, 1875; also in the *Columbus Democrat*. The case was resurrected by Dr. William C. Kettel and, with the pictures, published in the *Western Journal of Surgery, Obstetrics, and Gynecology*, November, 1941, XLIX, 636.

6. 1876, Pearce's case, South Carolina. On September 11, 1876, in Mars Bluff, South Carolina, a colored woman, multipara, gave birth to 3 male and 2 female infants, about six weeks premature, small but well developed, weighing about 2½ pounds each; they died soon after birth. There were two placentas, one female on one, the other four on the other. The case was reported by the attending physician, Dr. James F. Pearce, in the *Medical News and Library*, Philadelphia, 1876, XXIV, 191.

7. 1880, Moffitt's case, Illinois. Mrs. H., of Monticello, Illinois, aged 35, mother of four previous children, gave birth on September 18-19, 1880, to 5 full-term well-de-

veloped infants, one male, sex of others not stated. Weight 3 to 5 pounds each, total 19 pounds. Two placentas, three cords attached to one, two to the other. The first child lived two weeks, the second three days, the others were stillborn. The case was reported by the attending physician, Dr. James Moffitt, *Medical and Surgical Reporter*, Philadelphia, 1881, XLIV, 334.

8. 1896, Lyon quintuplets, Kentucky. On April 29, 1896, at Mayfield, Kentucky, Dr. S. J. Matthews delivered Mrs. Elizabeth Lyon, age 39, with seven previous children, of 5 living male infants, in the course of an hour. They were at the eighth month of gestation, and weighed 4 to 5 pounds each, total $21\frac{3}{4}$ pounds. They were attached to five placentas, «grown together =. All died within fifteen days.

After the death of Dr. Matthews the details of the case were published by Dr. Albert Bernheim, of Philadelphia (who obtained the information personally from Dr. Matthews), in the *Deutsche Medizinische Wochenschrift*, 1899, XXV, 274, and in the *New York Medical Journal and Philadelphia Medical Journal*, 1904, LXXX, 776, pictures of the infants and placentas being also given. A biographic article about Mrs. Lyon, with pictures, was published in the *Beaumont Journal*, Texas, for December 30, 1935; and an obituary record of her in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* for January 31, 1942, 391.

9. 1902, McGowan quintuplets, New York, Mrs. John McGowan, of Tucker's Corners, Ulster County, New York, on April 13, 1902, gave birth to 5 daughters, all alive and well. The case was reported as a news item in the *New York Sun*, April 15, 1902, 1.

10. 1906, Patterson quintuplets, Georgia. The *Atlanta Constitution* for August 29, 1944, gave an account, related by a former neighbor, of a case of quintuplets that had occurred in Gainesville, Georgia, about 1906. A Mrs. Patterson gave birth to 2 male and 3 female infants (as remembered); they had died some days after birth.

11. 1914 Druery quintuplets, Kentucky. On February 10-11, 1914, Mrs. Bertha Druery, of Taylorsville, Kentucky, age 23, one previous child, gave birth to 3 living male and 2 dead female infants, of about 8 months gestation. The males, weighing about 5 pounds each, were attached by three cords to one placenta; and the females, somewhat macerated and small but fully developed, were attached to a second placenta by a single bifurcated cord. The attending physician was Dr. J. F. Furnish. The mother has not been pregnant since. On the father's side there was a history of twins. Of the three sons, one died at the age of two years; the other two lived to serve in World War II, and are the only quintuplets in the United States known to have survived to maturity.

Case reported in *Louisville Courier-Journal*, March 25, 1948; clinical report in *Journal of the Medical Society of New Jersey*, December, 1951, XLVIII, 547; and personal local investigation.

12. 1936, Hamblen's case, North Carolina. On November 4, 1936, a white woman aged 20, who had had a previous abortion at three months, was delivered in Duke Hospital, Durham, North Carolina, of 5 female five-month fetuses, four well-formed, one an anencephalic monster. Heart action continued in two for 30 minutes after birth. The four well-formed fetuses ranged from 14.5 to 16 centimeters in length, and 192

to 254 grams in weight; the monster was five centimeters long. There was one placenta. Diagnosis of the polyembryony was made ante-partum by X-ray. The case was reported in detail, with illustrations, by the attending physician, Dr. E. C. Hamblen and associates, in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, July 3, 1937, CIX, 10.

13. 1945, Turner quintuplets, Washington, D. C. Mrs. Harold Turner, colored, 36, mother of six previous children (including one pair of twins), in Freedman's Hospital, Washington, D. C., gave birth on March 27, 1945, to 5 female infants, one stillborn, the others dying within 5½ hours. Delivery took place within 17 minutes. The children were fully developed, premature at 6½ months, and weighed 1 to 1½ pounds each. The case was reported in the *Washington Evening Star* March 28, 1945, B 1; the *Washington Post* March 29, 1945, 7; and in U. S. *Vital Statistics* for 1945.

14. 1946, Ross quintuplets, Florida. Mrs. Dorothy Ross, of Jacksonville, Florida, colored, age 18, mother of one previous child 14 months old, gave birth on November 9, 1946, to 5 living female infants. Premature, at 4½ months; died within about half an hour. During the labor the conditions were diagnosed by X-ray (*Florida Times-Union*, Jacksonville, November 11, 1946, 11; personal communication from the attending physician, Dr. Frank E. All.).

15. 1948, Gadlage quintuplets, Kentucky. Mrs. Roman Gadlage, of Louisville, Kentucky, white, age 33, two previous abortions, on March 24, 1948, gave birth to 3 stillborn girls and 2 living boys who died in about 20 minutes; premature at 5 months, weighing from 255 to 420 grams each. X-ray diagnosis of the multiparity was made ante-partum. There were two separate placentas, the males attached to one and the females to the other by separate cords. The mother suffered acute hydramnios, which was relieved by treatment; her post-partum recovery was prompt and uneventful. Her paternal grandmother was a twin.

The case was reported in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* March 25, 1948; in the U. S. *Vital Statistics* for 1948; and by the attending physicians, Drs. Arthur C. Lawrence and A. J. Pauli, with illustrations, in the *Journal of the Medical Society of New Jersey* December, 1951, XLVIII, 547.

16. 1950, Allen quintuplets, Louisiana. Alberta Allen, colored, mother of three previous children, gave birth on June 27, 1950, in Charity Hospital, New Orleans, to 3 boys and 2 girls, living, but dying within about 4¼ hours. They were born in the course of forty minutes; three months premature, and weighing 9 to 12 ounces each. The details of the case were published under date of June 28 in various newspapers, such as the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Washington Evening Star*; and were verified by personal correspondence with the hospital.

17. 1950, Brown quintuplets, North Carolina. Mrs. Viola Rogers Brown, colored, of Williamston, North Carolina, at the age of 16 years bore quadruplets at about 5½ months gestation; and a couple of years later a single child, living. On July 12, 1950, at the age of 21, she gave birth in the course of 70 minutes to 3 male and 2 female infants, living but dying in a few minutes. They were at about 5½ months gestation, and weighed 1 to 1¼ pounds each. Accounts of the case were published in the newspapers, such as

the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Evening Star* of July 13, 1950; and the details were obtained and verified by personal correspondence with the attending physician, Dr. J. T. Llewellyn. This case occurred only about two weeks after the preceding case, a weird freak of chance !

Canadian quintuplet births

There have been two cases of quintuplet births recorded in Canada:

1. Murray quintuplets, 1880. On February 15, 1880, Mrs. Adam Murray, of New Glasgow, Nova Scotia, gave birth to 2 male and 3 female infants, very small but perfectly formed. Three of them died on the first day, another on the second day. Mrs. Murray was aged 30 years, and this was her eighth accouchement; her mother bore eighteen children, twins three times. The case was resurrected and reported, with a photograph of the infants, by Norma Ford and Gioacchino Caruso in *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, October, 1938, XXXIX, 333.

2. Dionne quintuplets, 1934. Five daughters were born alive to Oliva and Elzire Dionne on May 28, 1934, near Callander, Ontario. The mother was 25 years of age, married at the age of 16, and had previously given birth singly to six children. Her last menstruation had occurred October 20, 1933; eclampsia developed in May, 1934; and labor took place on May 28, under the care of Dr. Allan Roy Dafoe. The combined weight of the five infants was 11½ pounds. They had separate amniotic sacs (at least the last two), with umbilical cords emerging at different points from the placenta, which was single, irregular in outline, and not divided into sections in any way. The mother was in desperate condition, so that a priest was summoned to administer the last rites; but she recovered, and in 1946 bore another son. The daughters, Annette, Emilie, Cecile, Marie, and Yvonne, who are monozygotic, have survived and thrived in the best of health; they were adopted and raised as wards of the provincial government, and became exhibits that attracted tremendous public attention and interest and acquired world-wide fame.

A detailed report of the case, with illustrations, was made by Dr. Dafoe in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, September 1, 1934, CIII, 673. Since then innumerable news items and accounts of the progress of these famous quintuplets have appeared in the literature. Their birth attracted so much interest that the public became very quintuplet-conscious, and the news agencies have since then been very active and alert in detecting and reporting such cases from all over the world.

Sextuplet births in the United States

In the United States there have occurred two well attested instances of sextuplet births; and three other cases have been reported as news items in responsible medical journals which lack specific verification. The details are as follows:

1. 1866, Bushnell sextuplets, Chicago. The story of the Bushnell sextuplets and associated fecundity is a fabulous one, comparable in rarity and interest with that of the famous Dionne quintuplets in Canada, although not so intensively publicised and exploi-

ted; and it merits similar publicisation. It attained considerable publicity in its locale, western New York, but it has had little attention in medical literature. Although there are discrepancies, uncertainties, lack of specific data, etc., the history of the case can be pieced out from a multitude of newspaper and other published items and accounts, and from unpublished family records, data, and information made available to the writer.

The family, according to the information presented, was a prodigy for progeny. Seventeen children were born, never less than three at a time. The sequence was triplets, born July 12, 1865, in Phelps, New York, deceased within eight months; sextuplets, born September 8, 1866, in Chicago, who survived; followed again by triplets, and quintuplets, probably born in Buffalo in the 1870's, deceased at birth. Such prodigious fecundity seems unbelievable; but other similar cases are on medical record. While this case lacks precise confirmation in some of its details, the positive statements of responsible members of the family, closely related and in position to know the facts, can not be altogether disregarded. The parents were, understandably, sensitive and reticent about the particulars, and the facts were not disclosed to the children until the death of the mother in 1881.

The father of this family was James Lewis Bushnell, born 1820, died 1904; by occupation a bookkeeper, he resided in Chicago about 1866-68, and then removed to and lived in Buffalo, Lockport, and Albion, in western New York. His wife, Jennie Alma, was born in 1845, and died in 1881, in Lockport.

The specific evidence for the birth of the Bushnell sextuplets is afforded by a medical certificate which was carefully preserved and cherished by the family, and is fortunately authenticated by a photograph of it published in *Look Magazine* in 1938. This certificate, dated September 15, 1866, certifies that Mrs. Jennie A. Bushnell, wife of J. L. Bushnell, in the city of Chicago on the 8th day of September, 1866, gave birth to six living children, 3 boys and 3 girls; it is signed, separately, by James Edwards, M. D., attending physician, and Prissilla Bancroft, midwife and nurse. The handwritten name Jennie in the certificate has sometimes been erroneously transcribed as Winnie. (The names of Dr. Edwards and the nurse Bancroft do not appear in the contemporary Chicago directories).

The most remarkable aspect of these sextuplets, ranking them with the Dionnes, was their survival, four of them living to old age. The life span of the individual children born September 8, 1866, was as follows:

Lucy A.; died 1867 or '68.

Laberto; died 1867 or '68.

Norberto James; no children; died April, 1934, in Buffalo.

Alberto James; unmarried; died June 24, 1940, in Albion.

Alice Elizabeth; married Rev. Joseph Hughes; had a pair of twins, who died young; died June 18, 1941, in Flagstaff, Arizona.

Alinea Lucy; married Daniel Parker 1900; had several infants who died at birth; died March 26, 1952, in Warsaw, New York, the last survivor of the sextuplets.

Many items and articles relating to the Bushnell sextuplets have been published in the newspapers and other general literature. A mention of the case was given in the *New York Times* for June 24, 1934, Section 8, page 6, in an article inspired by the recent

Dionne births. The family had a surge of publicity in 1938. In June of that year Robert L. Ripley featured the case, with two of the sextuplets present, in one of his « Believe It Or Not = broadcasts in New York City. Considerable publicity was given the case in the press at that time; and *Look Magazine* for October 25, 1938, page 26, published the details of the case, illustrated with photographs of the three then survivors and of the birth certificate by Dr. James Edwards.

In the *Journal of Heredity* for July, 1948, XXXIX, 204, Dr. H. H. Newman reported this Bushnell case. His article was republished in the *New York Times* for October 31, 1948. The case is included in an exhaustive compilation of high plural births by Dr. C. F. Mayer in *Acta Geneticae Medicae et Gemellologiae*, Rome, 1952, I, 128.

The last survivor of the sextuplets was Mrs. Alincia Bushnell Parker, whose last days were spent in Warsaw, New York, under the nursing care of Mrs. Ruth M. Silber, who has generously obtained and furnished the writer much unpublished information concerning the family. In a book entitled « Upstate Echoes =, 1950, by Arch Merrill, a chapter entitled « The last sextuplet = (page 128) gives a detailed account of the family and of its last survivor. Mrs. Parker died in Warsaw on March 16, 1952, an obituary sketch being published in the *Rochester Times-Union* for March 27.

The large amount of information relating to it, coming from many different sources and in general agreement, invest the Bushnell case of sextuplets with a high degree of credibility and authenticity, and it has been widely reputed and accepted as genuine.

2. 1936, Speichinger sextuplets, Missouri. On August 9, 1936, near Mendon, Missouri, Mrs. Philip Speichinger, a farmer's wife, aged 36, mother of nine previous children, gave birth to sextuplets, 1 male and 5 female, 1 born living and 5 stillborn. The attending physician, Dr. William B. Lucas (aided later by his son, Dr. John H. Lucas) was called to the case about 1 A. M., and found the mother in very poor condition. Early in the morning a living daughter was born, at or near full term, very large in size (9 pounds), in a separate amniotic sac. A few minutes later another amniotic sac was delivered intact, which on being opened disclosed the presence of 5 diminutive fetuses of about two or three months' gestation, together weighing something over a pound. This was regarded as a superfetation or later impregnation which if not interrupted by the living daughter's birth might have proceeded to further development and viability. The mother's condition was critical, but she recovered completely. The surviving daughter, Marjorie Louise, is still living, healthy, and normal, now the only known living sextuplet in the United States.

This case was not reported in the medical literature, but these details have been furnished in personal communications from the attending physicians and from the mother. Contemporary accounts of the case were published in the local *Weekly Brunswicker* for August 21, 1936, and on or near the date of August 22 in many newspapers all over the country, such as the *Kansas City Star* (with illustrations), *New York Sun*, *New York Herald-Tribune*, *Baltimore News-Post*, *Washington Evening Star*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Minneapolis Tribune*, *Des Moines Register*, *Louisville Courier-Journal*, etc. The case has also been featured by Ripley's « Believe It Or Not » (see *Washington Times-Herald* for April 18, 1951, page 40).

In addition to the two foregoing credible cases, there have been three other cases in the United States reported as news items in high-class medical journals, which lack detailed and satisfactory confirmation, as follows:

3. 1847, Marr sextuplets, Maine. The *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* for August 5, 1847, XXXV, 27, gave a brief news item, from a Bath newspaper, that Mrs. Marr, of Phippsburg, Maine, on June 27 had given birth to sextuplets, 2 living and 4 dead infants. No further information or confirmation is available or known.

4. 1888, Hirsh sextuplets, Texas. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* for November 17, 1888, XI, 719, published a news item that Mrs. George Hirsh, of Navarro County, on November 3, 1888, at Dallas, Texas, gave birth to 4 male and 2 female infants, all living. Further information on this case has not been elicited.

5. 1899, Karl sextuplets, Alabama. According to the *Medical News*, New York, for December 16, 1899, LXXV, 804, it was « reported » that Mrs. J. Karl, of Mobile, Alabama, gave birth on December 8, 1899, to 6 male infants. Personal inquiry (in 1951) of members of the family failed to elicit any definite information or confirmation of this case, other than a vague and indistinct recollection of some sort of a miscarriage having occurred in the family about that time.

In addition to the foregoing, 3 cases of alleged sextuple births in the United States, in Idaho, Nevada, and Indiana, have been reported in Japanese newspapers, but are without confirmation in American literature (C. F. Mayer, *Acta Geneticae Medicae et Gemellologiae*, Rome, 1952, I, 131-132).

Septuple births and upward—There are in the modern literature a number of reports of seven or more human infants born at single accouchments, none of which can apparently be regarded as convincingly verified. So far as authentic information goes six children at a birth is the maximum possibility and record of mothers. The following instances of such alleged very high plural births in the United States have appeared in the literature.

1. 1899, Hackett septuplets, Pennsylvania. A news item in the *Medical News*, New York, August, 1899, LXXV, 180, stated that a few days previously Mrs. George Hackett, of Brownsville, Pennsylvania, colored, mother of two previous children, bore septuplets, 3 male and 4 female, small but well formed; born alive, but 6 died in a few hours. Correspondence elicited no further details or confirmation.

2. 1903, Mexican case. According to an item in the *Medical Record*, New York, 1903, LXIII, 267, Dr. R. C. Schultz was told by a Mexican woman that she had twice aborted at the second or third month, seven fetuses being born each time. This hearsay was deemed worthy of publication in a responsible medical journal.

3. 1872, Bradlee octuplets, Ohio (spurious case). The birth of 3 male and 5 female living infants on August 21, 1872, to Mrs. Timothy Bradlee of Trumbull County, Ohio, together with some other remarkable alleged details, was reported as a news item in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* for September 26, 1872, LXXXVII, 224. This case has been repeatedly and extensively cited in the literature; however, it was a spurious and false report, perpetrated in malice or as a hoax and practical joke, as affirmed

by the clerk of the county court, published in the above Boston journal for April 22, 1915, CLXXII, 610.

Many details concerning foregoing cases are given by C. F. Mayer in his masterly global catalogue of high plural births, published in *Acta Geneticae Medicae et Gemellologiae*, Rome, 1952, volume I.

The cases here detailed afford reliable data and figures which will serve to allay much error and misconception on this subject which has been current.

Acknowledgements are here made for important information furnished by Dr. Jeanette Dean Throckmorton, Librarian Iowa State Medical Library, Des Moines, Iowa; Mrs. Ruth M. Silber, Warsaw, New York; and Mrs. Helen K. Lauve, Galveston, Texas.