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***Carcinoma Uteri* and ‘Sexual Debauchery’— Morality, Cancer and Gender in the Nineteenth Century**

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Summary

Contemporary popular medical discourse on cervical cancer is characterised by the idea that ‘cervical cancer is rare in nuns and common in prostitutes’.

It is thus clear that this serious disease is closely connected to a dichotomy in gender politics. This paper seeks to show the connection between cervical cancer, morality and gender since the early nineteenth century. In the earlier part of the period, German physicians regarded female sexual activity outside marriage, and sex not directed towards reproduction, as the cause of the disease. Accordingly, every woman who developed cervical cancer aroused suspicions of having engaged in 'too much' sex or having committed 'self-pollution'. Within this context, Susan Sontag pointed to the specific historical and cultural implications of the metaphorical interpretations of cancer and the ways in which these might burden patients. Following Sontag's injunction to resist a metaphorical interpretation of illness, this article reconstructs and deconstructs a moralising view of cervical cancer and its victims. The paper focuses on the first decades of the nineteenth century, an era of fundamental change in gender history and the history of sexuality.

Keywords: [cancer](#), [gender](#), [medical ethics](#), [gynaecology](#), [sexuality](#), [masturbation](#), [Germany](#)

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