

The “infertility” of Catherine de Medici and its influence on 16th century France

Jennifer Gordetsky, MD, Ronald Rabinowitz, MD, Jeanne O'Brien, MD

Department of Urology, University of Rochester Medical Center, Rochester, New York, USA

GORDETSKY J, RABINOWITZ R, O'BRIEN J. The “infertility” of Catherine de Medici and its influence on 16th century France. The Canadian Journal of Urology. 2009;16(2):4584-4588.

Objective: Catherine de Medici, queen consort of King Henry II of France, was a powerful woman at a time when power for her sex was determined by fecundity. A decade long history of infertility might have placed her at risk for condemnation, but her husband's known urologic abnormalities played in her favor. This presentation will address the penile deformity of her husband, Henry II, and how this likely played a crucial role in her eventual rise to power, the interventions undertaken with regard to her purported infertility, and the historical ramifications when Catherine de Medici went on to have children.

Material and methods: A review of the literature of the lives of Catherine de Medici, King Henry II, and their children was completed.

Results: The inability to conceive an heir in the first decade of Catherine de Medici's marriage was attributed to Henry II, who was born with hypospadias and chordee. Through the intervention of Doctor Jean Fernel, the royal couple went on to have 10 children. When Henry II died in 1559 Catherine de Medici went on to rule France in the name of her sons for the next 3 decades, until her death in 1589.

Conclusion: Henry II was born with hypospadias and chordee, and this contributed to the inability of Catherine de Medici to conceive a child for the first 10 years of their marriage. The cure of “her” infertility changed the course of history, as she subsequently ruled in the name of her sons following the death of Henry II.

Key Words: male infertility, hypospadias, history of medicine

Catherine de Medici was born at the Medici Palace in Florence April 13, 1519. Within 3 weeks of her birth, both of her parents had died. The Pope at the time was Leo X, Leo Giovanni de Medici, and he sent Cardinal Giulio de Medici to undertake guardianship of the little girl. She was brought back to Rome to be raised by her Aunt Clarice Strozzi. Two years later Pope Leo X died and was succeeded by Adrian VI, despite every effort

of Cardinal Giulio de Medici to secure the position. By chance, fate, or perhaps poison, Adrian VI died 20 months later. With his chief rival eradicated, Giulio successfully became Pope Clement VII in 1523.

In 1526 Clement VII allied with France, Florence, Milan and Venice, known as the League of Cognac, and waged war against Emperor Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire.¹ Rome was subsequently sacked by Spanish and German troops in 1527.¹ The war forced Catherine and her Aunt to return to Florence for their safety.^{2,3} Clement VII became decidedly unpopular in his rule and in 1527 the people of Florence vented their anger on the Medici family.¹ The people of Florence sought to destroy all reminder of the Medici.

Accepted for publication February 2009

Address correspondence to Dr. Jennifer Gordetsky, Dept. of Urology, University of Rochester Medical Center, 601 Elmwood Avenue, Box 656, Rochester, NY 14642-8656 USA



Figure 1. Portrait of Catherine de Medici (1519-89) wife of King Henri II of France (1519-59), French School, (16th century)/Palazzo Pitti, Florence, Italy/ Wikimedia Commons/Public domain.

Interestingly this was the same uprising that caused Michelangelo’s statue of David to lose its left arm when a stone was thrown at it.¹ The uprising forced Catherine to leave the Medici Palace and she was sent to a convent for her own safety. The next 3 years saw the girl in a semi-incarceration within Florence, with her life constantly threatened.^{1,3} Pope Clement VII, being a Medici, was not pleased with the revolt in Florence and his family in exile. In 1530, he laid siege to Florence with 30000 men.² Catherine was released from Florence and returned to Rome. Less than 6 weeks later, negotiations were completed for her marriage to Henry Duke of Orleans, the second son of Francis I, King of France.² Catherine’s dowry included a substantial sum of money and land.^{2,4} The contract was signed in 1531, and the actual wedding took place in Marseilles, France, on October 28, 1533. Pope Clement VII died in 1534 and the new Pope, Paul III, refused to honor the dowry obligations or

the alliance with France.^{4,5} Both Catherine and Henry were 14 years old and essentially strangers.

Although Catherine reportedly loved her husband, his attentions went only to his mistress, Diane de Poitiers. She was a widow, 19 years older than the king, and his childhood mentor.¹ The nature of their relationship changed to a sexual one in approximately 1537.² Despite the age difference, their love affair continued until Henry’s death in 1559. Henry made no attempt to conceal the affair and even wore Diane’s colors of silver and black in public.² Catherine faced this situation with quiet acquiescence. Years later in a letter to her daughter she wrote, “never did a woman who loved her husband succeed in loving his mistress” however “if I made good cheer for her it was really him I was entertaining”.² She was also known to say, “caress only your enemies”.⁶

The first 10 years of marriage yielded no heir. Despite Henry’s extramarital affairs, he did consummate his union with Catherine. In fact, King Francis I confirmed the consummation of the marriage himself as he “wished to watch them jousting, and each of them jousted valiantly”.^{1,3} Catherine and Henry’s infertility



Figure 2. Portrait of Henri II (1519-59) (oil on panel), Clouet, Francois (c.1510-72) (workshop of)/ Louvre, Paris, France, Giraudon/ Wikimedia Commons/Public domain.

would not have been an issue except that the King's first son died unexpectedly in 1536 of pleurisy. As a result, Henry, Duke of Orleans, became heir to the throne of Francis I.⁷ Rumors began to spread about Catherine's sterility and talk of divorce began to surface.² Catherine went to King Francis I in tears, offering to join a convent, if he felt it necessary to replace her.^{2,6} The King, partial to his daughter in law, reassured her that there would be no divorce, as he was confident that the Lord would provide her with children.⁶

Catherine went on to pursue multiple interventions to cure 'her' infertility. She surrounded herself with doctors, diviners and magicians. She refused to travel by mule, believing that the infertile animal would transmit its sterility to those who rode it.³ She also made use of tarot cards, charms, and alchemy. Although deeply devoted to both astrology and the Catholic faith, Catherine also resorted to medieval remedies.³ She drank the urine of pregnant animals, consumed the powdered sexual organs of boars, stags and cats, and mixed many different herbs in her food and wine.^{1,6} Another remedy required a mixture of unicorn horn and ivory in water.⁶ Due to the scarcity of unicorn horns, another recipe called for mare's milk, rabbit's blood and sheep's urine.⁶ Alternatively, one could consume the blood of a hare and the left hind paw of a weasel mixed with vinegar.⁶

Consistent with historical sexism, this 16th century couple's sterility was attributed to Catherine. Perhaps it was conveniently overlooked that Henry's mistress, Diane, already a mother of two, also failed to achieve a pregnancy with Henry. Granted, she was in her late thirties at the beginning of the affair and her age certainly could have been a hindrance in achieving pregnancy. Additionally, in 1537, Henry II made claim to his own fertility while campaigning in Italy. He claimed to be father to the illegitimate daughter of Filippa Duci after spending only one night with the girl.¹ When Filippa Duci bore a daughter in 1538, the child was legitimized by Henry, thereby ensuring 'proof' of his virility. However, most modern historians suggest the fault lay more with Henry than with Catherine due to documentation of a penile malformation.⁸ Details given by two doctors, Nicolas Venette and Jean Fernel, found the problem to be with the King after examination and diagnosis of his hypospadias.^{2,3,6,9,10} This malformation was also reported by the 16th century biographer Messire Pierre de Bourdeille, Seigneur and Abbé de Brantôme.³ Additionally, Henry's infertility was commented on by the 17th century author Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac who stated, "it is sufficient to say that the cause was solely

in Henri II. . .¹¹" and "nothing is commoner in surgical experience than such a malformation as the prince's, which gave rise to a jest of the ladies of the Court . . .²". Hypospadias, which is often present with chordee, can lead to infertility from failure of semen to reach the vaginal canal due to either improper meatal position or inability to achieve penetration from penile curvature. Severe cases are treated in modern day medicine with surgical intervention, which was not available in the 16th century. Unfortunately, the severity of Henry's penile malformation cannot be determined from the literature. His infertility may have been due to either poor meatal position, curvature causing difficulty with penetration, or a combination of both factors. However, it is sufficient to say that the condition was significant enough to prompt a consultation of Jean Fernel, one of the most renowned physicians in France at the time.

Diane de Poitiers was the third person in Catherine and Henry's complex relationship, and the most influential female in this marriage. With Catherine in place, Diane's political position and influence over Henry II was secure. If Catherine was replaced, Diane might have been forced to compete with a younger, more influential Queen. Diane convinced Henry that Catherine was not infertile and made certain that Henry went to his wife nightly to have sexual intercourse.⁶ Diane also put an end to Catherine's use of magical remedies. Obviously Diane was aware of Henry's hypospadias and suggested that the couple make love "à levrette" (a levrette is a small greyhound bitch)⁶. According to Brantôme, Catherine had a carpenter drill spy holes in the floor of her bedroom, directly above the bedchamber of Diane de Poitiers.¹ Catherine took it upon herself to observe her husband and his mistress in bed, perhaps for her own education. In addition, the physician Jean Fernel examined Catherine and Henry. Jean Fernel was a renowned French philosopher, mathematician, and physician.¹⁰ He received a doctorate in medicine in 1530 and practiced in Paris.¹⁰ Fernel was well published and particularly remembered for his writings on human physiology.¹⁰ He was considered a 'master of medicine' in the schools of 16th century Europe.¹⁰ After examining the royal couple and diagnosing Henry's hypospadias, he suggested trying different coital positions and gave Catherine pills of myrrh.⁶ When Catherine finally achieved a pregnancy, the credit was officially given to Jean Fernel and he received a pension for life.^{6,10}

Catherine went on to bear 10 children. Catherine's first child, Francis, later King Francis II, was born in January 1543. Her second child, Elisabeth, was born in April 1545. Another girl, Claude, was born in

September 1547. In 1548, Catherine gave birth to her second son, Louis, but the child lived only 2 years. Her third son, Charles-Maximilien, was born in 1550. He would later become King Charles IX. Her sixth child arrived in September 1551. He would later become King Henry III. Margaret, also called Margot, was born in May 1553 and went on to bring much grief to Catherine’s life. Hercules, Catherine’s eighth child and the last child to survive, was born in May 1554. She gave birth to twins in 1556, at the age of 37, who subsequently died.

Upon the death of King Francis I in 1547, Catherine’s husband ascended to the throne as King Henry II. Catherine’s role in Court was minimal until the King’s untimely death in 1559. A splinter of wood from a jousting lance pierced his eye and he died from infection 10 days later. If Catherine had failed to produce any children, her story might very well have ended there. Instead she went on to rule in the name of her first son, King Francis II. In fact, all of the King’s official acts opened with the words, “this being the good pleasure of the Queen, my lady mother, and I also approving of every opinion that she holdeth, am content and command that . . .”² Francis was a sickly child and was subject to dizziness, fatigue, respiratory illness and was also believed to have undescended testicles.² When he died in 1560 of an ear abscess, Catherine de Medici declared her 10-year-old son, Charles-Maximilien, to be Charles IX, king of France and she became Regent of France, to rule in his stead. When Charles died in 1574, she continued to exert her influence over her son King Henry III. The reign of her three sons came to be known as “the age of Catherine de Medici”.¹

Catherine’s rise to power through the names of her sons certainly had political implications on the history of 16th century France. Perhaps the most notorious event during the reign of Catherine de Medici was the Massacre of Saint Bartholomew. The tragedy took place in Paris, France, on August 24, 1572, the day of the feast of St. Bartholomew. There was religious strife between French Catholics and Protestants, known as the Huguenots. This was also the time of the arranged marriage between Catherine’s Catholic daughter, Margot, and Henry, the King of Navarre, who was a Protestant. Many Huguenots journeyed to Paris to witness the event, which was to be held August 18, 1572. Following the wedding, Gaspard de Coligny, a leader of the Huguenots, survived an assassination attempt, prompting militant reaction by the Huguenots.^{1,2} Within an hour, armed bands of Huguenots roamed the streets of Paris, planning to occupy the Louvre and capture the city and the King. Religious uprisings had been occurring throughout France for some time;

the marriage simply provided the occasion and the assassination attempt the excuse. Since the Queen was aware of this plot through a spy, she decided a counterattack was necessary. On Sunday, August 24th, 1572, only 2 days after Coligny had survived the initial assassination, he was murdered. Catherine had only planned on the death of the Huguenot leaders and Coligny. Unfortunately, after his death a mob swept through Paris using “Huguenot” as an excuse for theft and murder.^{1,2} When order was finally restored, the number killed was approximately 3000 in Paris alone.² Catherine’s comment was, “it was better that it should fall on them than on us. What has been done is no more than is necessary”.²

Interestingly, though Catherine was able to rule France through the control she maintained over her sons, her daughter Margot offered only rebellion. It seems that the Medici women were strong of character for Margot’s rebellion was in spite of her fear of her mother. In a conversation with her brother she said, “it is not only that I dare not open a conversation with her, but when she looks at me I almost die of fright in case I have done something to displease her”.² Despite her fear she went on to defy her mother in having extramarital affairs and then in resisting her arranged Catholic Huguenot marriage to Henry of Navarre. Catherine once lamented about her daughter Margot saying, “I see that God has left me this creature for the punishment of my sins through the afflictions she gives me. She is my curse in this world”.² At first Henry and Margot created a mutual loyalty in their marriage but this soon faltered in part due to Henry’s infidelities. Margot pursued her own publicly known love affairs later in the marriage. Distaste grew between the royal couple to a point where Margot tried to poison and then shoot her husband without success.¹ Margot fled but was eventually arrested in 1586 and her lover executed. She eventually was freed and spent the next 14 years in exile, living on the generosity of Charles IX’s widow Elisabeth of Austria. In Catherine’s eyes her daughter was a disgrace and she had ceased to exist.¹ Henry of Navarre ascended the French throne in 1589 as King Henry IV. He annulled his marriage with Margot in 1599 and remarried in 1600. Margot eventually returned to Paris and maintained an amicable relationship with Henry but her divorce ended the Valois monarchy in France.

Although 16th century France was a time of religious warfare, under the rule of Catherine de Medici, it was also a time of art and culture.^{1,2,4,10} Catherine was a celebrated patron of the arts. She held extravagant court festivals to display the prestige and magnificence of the Valois monarchy. These festivals were filled with

musical shows and dances that later gave rise to our modern form of ballet. She also funded the building of many architectural projects including work on the Saint-Maur-des-Fossés, the Louvre, and two palaces, the Tuileries and the Hotel de la Reine. She commissioned a spectacular tomb for Henry II at the basilica of Saint Denis, designed by Francesco Primaticcio. She also supported the creation of sculptures, portraits and paintings.

In conclusion, the “infertility” of Catherine de Medici was at least in part due to the penile deformity of her husband Henry II. After intervention from the renowned physician Jean Fernel, Catherine went on to bear 10 children and subsequently ruled in the name of three of her sons after the death of her husband. The cure of “her” infertility may well have changed the course of history. □

References

1. Frieda Leonie. Catherine de Medici: Renaissance Queen of France. New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2005:1-392.
2. Williamson Hugh R. Catherine de' Medici. New York, NY: The Viking P, Inc., 1973:11-283.
3. Heritier Jean. Catherine de Medici. Trans. Charlotte Haldane. New York, NY: St Martin's P, 1963:15-469.
4. De Bourdeille Abbe de Brantome Pierre. The Book of the Ladies (Illustrious Dames). Trans. Katharine P. Wormeley. Boston, MA: Hardy, Pratt & Company, 1902:44-88.
5. Knecht RJ. The French Renaissance Monarchy: Francis I and Henry II. New York, NY: Addison-Wesley Longman, Limited, 1997:30-46.
6. Princess Michael of Kent. The Serpent and the Moon: Two Rivals for the Love of a Renaissance King. New York, NY: Touchstone, 2004:194-224.
7. Baumgartner Frederic J. Henry II 1547-1559. Durham and London: Duke UP, 1988:30-31.
8. Paulson Michael G. Catherine de Medici: Five Portraits. Peter Lang Publishing, INC, 2002:5.
9. Paulson Michael G. Introduction. Catherine de Medici: Five Portraits. New York, NY: Peter Lang, Inc., 2002:5-6.
10. Sherrington Sir Charles. The Endeavour of Jean Fernel. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1946:176.
11. De Balzac Honore. Catherine de Medicis. Trans. Katherine P. Wormeley. Champaign, ILL: Project Gutenberg. 19. NetLibrary. 2008. University of Rochester. 30 Sept. 2008 <<http://www.netlibrary.com.ezp.miner.rochester.edu/details.aspx>>.