

BOOK REVIEW

Toxic Shock: A Social History **by Sharra L Vostral**

Paperback, 240 pages
New York University Press
November 2018

Toxic Shock examines the emergence of and response to tampon-related “toxic shock syndrome” (TSS) in the US during the late 1970s and 1980s. Although TSS is by no means limited to those using tampons, Vostral is clear that her focus is on the tampon-related syndrome and outlining the medical, social, political and legislative responses to this health concern.

The author sets her book out over five chapters, each introducing the key players in the story of tampon-related TSS. In the introduction and first chapter, she outlines the scientific understanding of TSS and how tampons should be seen as a “biocatalytic technology” rather than an inert object. She also describes how physicians and epidemiologists first identified the syndrome.

The following chapters explore the response to its discovery. This includes the manufacturers of tampons who, by and large, disputed the potential link between TSS and their products, although labelling warning women of the risks of TSS was eventually agreed upon. Another chapter explores the reaction of the media, which helped to spread the word about TSS but also created a degree of confusion. Vostral also discusses the legal response in terms of the cases brought by those affected by TSS and their families, and the response of government agencies, as well as the push by activists for more control and regulation of tampons.

Vostral shows how the response to tampon-related TSS was a gendered one. Not only does she repeatedly demonstrate the importance of the few women involved in the government agencies tasked with investigating TSS but also the difficulties of getting TSS talked about in the media when menstruation was still a taboo subject. She also sets out how TSS came about while the women’s health movement was gaining momentum and, at the same time, the neoliberalism of the Reagan administration sought to limit government interference with commerce.

Through clear explanation of the science behind TSS and its association with tampons, alongside first-hand testimonies from survivors of TSS, menstruators and those researching TSS in the 1980s, Vostral brings together an impressive range of evidence to explain the social history of this often-devastating condition.

Toxic Shock is a must-read for those interested in the history of menstruation as well as anyone interested in the gendering of medicine and the politics of reproductive health.

Rebecca Fallas
April 2019

Published online at www.bshh.org.uk.