

# METRO



NEW  
ZEALAND'S  
FIRST CITY  
MAGAZINE

JUNE 1987 \$3.50  
(INCLUDES GST)

*An*  
**UNFORTUNATE  
EXPERIMENT**

*at*  
***National  
Women's***

*by* SANDRA CONEY  
*and*  
PHILLIDA BUNKLE

---



*An*  
**'UNFORTUNATE  
 EXPERIMENT'**  
*At National Women's*

**BY SANDRA CONEY AND PHILLIDA BUNKLE**

**I**N OCTOBER 1985, RUTH (NOT HER REAL NAME, FOR LEGAL REASONS which will become clear later in this story) returned from National Women's Hospital and told her workmates she felt she'd just been to Auschwitz. "I feel as if they've been experimenting on me," she said. Ruth's fellow teachers thought she was being ridiculous and said so and so she pushed her doubts to the back of her mind.

It was over 20 years since Ruth had made her first visit to National Women's Hospital. She had not been a teacher then, but a 27-year-old suburban mother of three small children. She had failed UE and with "the disadvantage of no education" remembers herself as "the sort of patient who meekly did what she was told."

She had been referred to the hospital by her general practitioner after a "suspicious" cervical smear. Having a cervical smear means that cells are collected from the surface of the neck of the womb using a sort of ice block stick, then smeared in a thin film across a glass plate so that their structure can be seen through a microscope.

At the hospital Ruth was told that though her smear was "suspicious", nothing more serious was going on. She came home and reassured her husband that she didn't have cancer and that there was nothing to worry about. "That", she remembers, "was the frame of mind they put me in from the beginning."

Six months later she had an examination of her cervix with the colposcope, a powerful magnifying instrument, and a single punch biopsy removed a fragment of tissue the size of a rice grain for scrutiny in the pathology laboratory. In the space of the next six months, Ruth had three colposcopies and three smears were taken. She felt confident that she was being carefully watched.

In mid-1965, Ruth became pregnant. Her GP was surprised when she told him about the pregnancy. "What do they think at National Women's? he asked. Ruth told him the doctor she saw at the hospital said it was fine and her GP agreed that he must know what he was doing. In March 1966, Ruth gave birth to her fourth child, a healthy eight-pound girl.

Sandra Coney is an Auckland freelance journalist. She is a former editor of *Broadsheet*. Her last story for *Metro* was about Pina. Phillida Bunkle is a Wellington academic. Both are connected with *Fertility Action*, a pressure group concerned with women's health choices.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN REYNOLDS