



Benjamin, Dr. Harry (1885-1986)

by Susan Stryker

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Harry Benjamin was a medical doctor now best remembered for his pioneering work with transsexuals.

Benjamin was born in Berlin in 1885. While still a university student, his interest in the science of sexuality led to a friendship with Magnus Hirschfeld, the leader of the homosexual emancipation movement and founding director of the Institute for Sexual Science. Benjamin accompanied Hirschfeld on visits to homosexual and transgender bars in Berlin when Hirschfeld was researching and writing *Die Transvestiten*, the first book-length treatment of transgender phenomena, published in 1910.

Benjamin completed his medical studies at the University of Tübingen in 1912, and came to the United States in 1913 to work as a doctor on a tuberculosis research project. He attempted to return to Germany in 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, but his ship was intercepted en route from New York and diverted to England. After a brief stay in an internment camp as an enemy alien, Benjamin was allowed to return to New York, where he became a United States citizen and established a successful medical practice.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Benjamin maintained close personal and professional contacts with Hirschfeld and the Viennese endocrinologist Eugen Steinach, a specialist in anti-aging treatments who also conducted the first medical experiments to determine the roles of estrogen and testosterone in the production of secondary sex characteristics. Benjamin himself became known as a prominent "gerontotherapist" who administered hormonal injections designed to rejuvenate the libidos of his aging patients. He returned regularly to Germany and Austria to visit friends and colleagues until the growing power of Nazism made this impossible.

By the 1940s, Benjamin was spending his summers in San Francisco, and it was there, in 1949, that he first took a professional interest in helping a transsexual patient. At the time, doctors in the United States refused to administer hormones or perform genital reconstruction surgery on transgendered people who desired these procedures. Benjamin was instrumental in bringing the less moralizing perspective of the German sexological tradition to bear on transgender issues in the United States.

In the early 1950s, especially after Christine Jorgensen's transsexual surgery in Denmark made headlines around the world in 1952, Benjamin found himself at the center of medical discussions about transsexuality. Although he did not coin the term "transsexual" (that honor goes to David O. Cauldwell in 1949), Benjamin did more than any other individual to bring that word into widespread public use.

Privately, Benjamin prescribed hormones for dozens, if not hundreds, of early transsexuals, and helped arrange genital surgeries for a select few. By 1966, when he published *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, Benjamin was justly regarded at the world's most prominent expert on the subject.

Benjamin's model for dealing with transgendered people is still the basic paradigm for transsexual medical care. In honor of his pioneering contributions to the field, the association of medical and psychotherapeutic



Dr. Harry Benjamin as a young man.
Image courtesy Archive for Sexology, Humboldt University, Berlin.

professionals who regulate access to transgender health care is known as the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIIGDA).

Although Harry Benjamin himself is remembered within the transgender community as a compassionate if somewhat paternalistic advocate for his transsexual patients, most contemporary transgender activists consider the so-called "Benjamin Standards of Care," the formal HBIIGDA treatment protocols that bear his name, to be offensively patronizing and pathologizing.

Benjamin maintained an active personal and professional life until the early 1980s. He died in New York in 1986, at the age of 101.

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