

ARTICLE

"Let's talk about sex": visitor comments in *Contraception: Uncovering the collection of Dame Margaret Sparrow*

STEPHANIE GIBSON 

Abstract *Contraception: Uncovering the collection of Dame Margaret Sparrow* was an exhibition at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa which featured a participatory activity titled "Let's talk about sex" where visitors could answer the question: "If you could give your younger self one piece of advice about contraception, what would it be?" Over 2200 comments were written, inspiring an evaluation project. The resulting analysis provides insights into visitors' attitudes, values, behaviours, experiences and concerns about contraception, sex, sexuality and sexual health in the early 21st century. The results also demonstrate the value and usefulness of visitor comments both as an exhibition experience and as data to complement formal evaluation methods. The paper also acknowledges the less successful aspects of the project.

INTRODUCTION

Contraception: Uncovering the collection of Dame Margaret Sparrow was a short-term exhibition at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) in 2015–16.¹ It was the first such exhibition on contraception in a New Zealand museum, and its significance was recognised when awarded as a finalist in the social history category of the New Zealand Museum Awards in 2016. Judges observed that "though modest, it invited interaction with visitors and was powerfully educational" (Museums Aotearoa 2016, 8).

During our formative evaluation for *Contraception* we tested whether visitors would participate by writing comments in the proposed exhibition. Eighty-three percent of interviewees indicated they would answer a question about contraception (MacDonald 2015). This finding was developed into a goal to provide a light-hearted visual attractor and participatory element which could engage

visitors and inspire conversation (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa 2015). The resulting activity dominated one wall of the exhibition. It was titled "Let's talk about sex" and invited visitors to answer the question: "If you could give your younger self one piece of advice about contraception, what would it be?" Visitors wrote their answers on small round pieces of paper and attached them to a large wall graphic printed in the shape of a 1960s circular pill packet (Figures 1–3).

Over 2200 comments were written during the life of the exhibition. The potential richness and usefulness of this material sparked an evaluation project which aimed to find meaning in this mass and better understand visitors' attitudes, values, behaviours, experiences and concerns about contraception, sex, sexuality and sexual health. This paper presents the findings, and aims to add a useful case study to the literature on the value of visitor comments both within exhibitions and as rich sources of data

Stephanie Gibson (stephanie.gibson@tepapa.govt.nz) is a Curator History at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand.



Figure 1. “Let’s talk about sex” participatory activity. Photo: Kate Whitley (Te Papa). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

complementing other methods of visitor research and exhibition evaluation (e.g., Davidson 2015; Hein 1998; Livingstone et al. 2001; Macdonald 2005; Mazda 2004; Patel et al.

2016; Pedretti and Soren 2003; Pekarik 1997; Worts 1995).²

It also investigates some of the less successful aspects of the project.

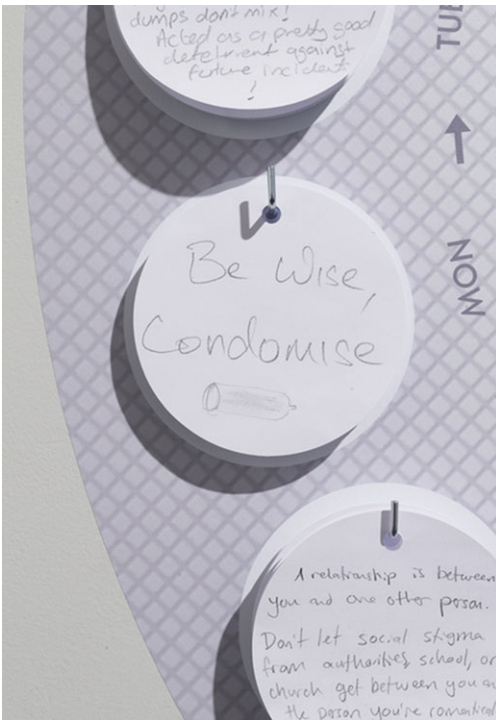


Figure 2. Detail of visitor comments in *Contraception*. Photos: Kate Whitley (Te Papa). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

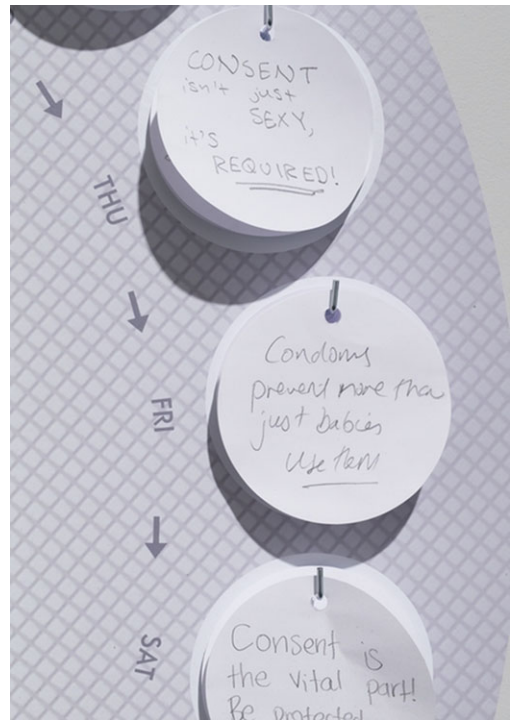


Figure 3. Detail of visitor comments in *Contraception*. Photos: Kate Whitley (Te Papa). [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Why Include a Participatory Activity?

Like many museums, Te Papa aims to create experiences which encourage audience engagement—where visitors can reflect on content and express points of view, discuss and share ideas, and produce their own content. Such participation can be empowering and “generate a flow of information from visitors to other visitors and to the surrounding society, and make an exhibition grow post-launch” (Pedretti and Soren 2003; Skydsgaard et al. 2016, 65).

Visitors’ comments within exhibitions have the potential to add richness and meaning, particularly with “hot” topics such as climate change, racism, sexism, poverty, and

mental health (Cameron and Kelly 2010; 1). As Gammon and Mazda note, visitor feedback opportunities “work best on subjects that visitors feel strongly about—those covering controversial and emotive issues” (2009, 31). For example, the Antenna project in the Wellcome Wing at the Science Museum in London is devoted to exploring hot topics in science and technology.³ It includes a community space, both physical and online, where visitors can share comments, and these comments can be displayed publicly in the gallery. In the Wing’s formative years, audience research indicated that visitors appreciated reading and engaging with other points of view (Mazda 2004; 142). Similarly, our summative interviewees observed that *Contraception* was “not just an

exhibition—people get a chance to feedback,” that it was “good to have interaction—good to have message wall,” and that “the personal notes make it worthwhile and real” (Gibson 2015).

The opportunity to comment may also be expected and desired. An international research project on contested topics in museums found that 90 per cent of audiences surveyed believed that museums “should allow their visitors to make comment” (Cameron 2005, 224). Fiona Cameron observes that “the capacity to engage contentious topics for the majority of audiences. . . is explicitly tied to the ability to provide socially integrative experiences in exhibitions—to engage with other visitors, the institution and to leave evidence of debates in exhibitions” (2005, 225).

Opportunities to comment can result in unique ecosystems where visitors are empowered to communicate directly in a public space. Their words may be shared, reflected upon, or negated by other visitors. In his analysis of visitor comments in an art context, Douglas Worts notes that:

“... much creative energy exists within the public—it is a powerful energy that has many faces—unpredictable, moving, insightful. Even when visitor reactions seem elusive and idiosyncratic, it is possible to relate to them emphatically, and I believe it enriches everyone’s experiences when we do so” (1995, 190).

Comments can bring life, diversity and a dose of reality to exhibitions (Gammon and Mazda 2009, 30–31). They can bring voices and perspectives which may not be present elsewhere in the museum, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex communities (LGBTI). They can enable public

“conversations” to take place about key issues in society. They can inject personal insights into displays that the museum itself “could not articulate” (Worts 1995, 175).

The colloquial language of many of the comments in *Contraception* acted as a counterpoint to the exhibition’s more neutral tone. Some of the comments channelled exhibition messages in more emotive and earthy language which may have resonated more for some visitors than the serious tone of the exhibition labels. For example, an exhibition label about condoms being the only contraceptive method to prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs) was augmented by several comments such as “Be careful who you sleep with, they may have STIs.”

By writing comments, visitors can contribute both meaning and aesthetics to an exhibition. They can also contribute nonsensical content or damage: one of the risks of inviting comments about contraception was the potential for visitors to undermine the messages of the exhibition with dubious ideas, biased opinions, and potentially harmful advice (e.g., comments which called for no protection during sex). Such comments were either removed by Te Papa hosts (front of house staff) who were responsible for checking the comments each morning and removing them when the hooks were full, or were counteracted by subsequent visitors. For example, one visitor wrote (Figure 4):

“Double or nothing” (drawing of two condoms together)

Subsequent comments were written in response:

“NO!”/“Don’t listen to this one—doubling up increases likelihood of failure!”

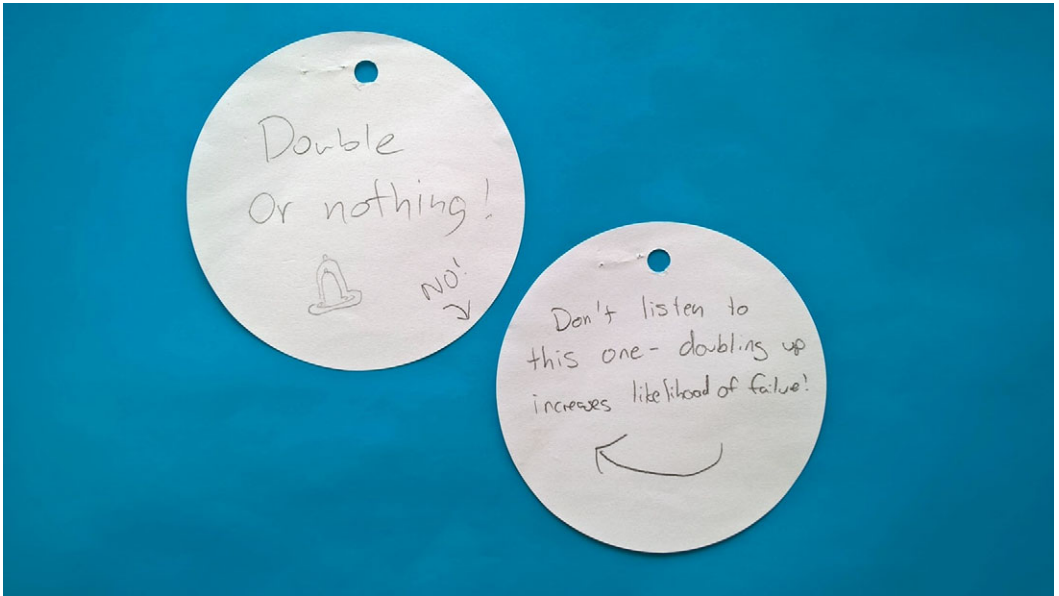


Figure 4. Visitor comments from *Contraception*. Photo: Stephanie Gibson. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Comments as Performance

The design of the comments wall in *Contraception* was prominent and inviting with its soft round shapes. The directness of the activity's title "Let's talk about sex" gave visitors a wide licence to express themselves.

The variety of handwriting, the range of messaging, and the tactile accumulation of layers of comments all provided a constantly changing, but collective and socially-interactive visitor experience. In his work on visitor books, Chaim Noy observes that written comments "remain long after their authors leave the site" (2008a, 517) and they:

"preserve what is transient. . .these traces remain long enough to be consumed and responded to by other visitors, and to be incorporated into the overall impression of their visit. This stability has significant consequences: it

enables visitors to interact with one another—to 'meet' and 'talk'—in and through the medium" (2008b, 189).

Thus, visitors' comments can be read as "socially situated performances," where people perform and share acts of writing in public spaces (Macdonald 2005, 122; Noy 2008a, 513). Such performances are affected by design and context. For example, *Contraception* was displayed in a small room, relatively private from the rest of the museum with glass doors that could be closed. The exhibition was devoted to the history of contraception in New Zealand, and consequently, sex, sexuality and sexual health. These are significant topics which affect everyone.

Visitor Comments in Audience Research

A key value of the comments in *Contraception* is their rich insight into a wide range of

visitors' attitudes, experiences, values, behaviours and concerns about contraception, sex, sexuality and sexual health in the early 21st century. Without analysis, these insights would be consigned mutely to the archive.

Museum exhibitions often include opportunities for visitors to comment, but analysis of such material is less likely, partly through lack of staff resources, and partly because of concerns that such data is unreliable due to its self-selected and sometimes anonymous nature. Visitor comments are usually written voluntarily and independently without a researcher's intervention. They cannot be held to represent the overall audience (Pekarik 1997; 67). Visitors' comments may not be considered a curatorial or interpretive priority; indeed, they may not be considered useful at all. Yet, they provide the opportunity for museum professionals, such as curators, to directly experience their audiences as key stakeholders (Ellison 2010, 184).

The cacophony of ideas, opinions, and at times, nonsense, may appear messy and irrelevant to visitor research. But with patient analysis, insights into visitors' views and experiences can emerge which are independent but complementary to other methods of research and evaluation. Visitor comments can also be "relatively free of forms of bias associated with other methods" (Davidson 2015, 513), such as the relationship between researcher and subject (Macdonald 2005, 122).

From a practical viewpoint, visitors' comments can provide a readily available and cost-effective resource for evaluation (Livingstone et al. 2001, 358). They can be written independently by visitors without staff interaction. They may also outnumber formal visitor research numbers, as occurred in the case of *Contraception*.⁴

However, in terms of data value and research integrity, there are several aspects to

consider at the outset when developing visitor feedback activities:

What is worth asking and why

How best to frame questions (e.g., asking open and personalised questions, and considering the surrounding context and design)

Ensuring informed consent of participants and whether to collect demographic information

The use and care of comments during and after the exhibition (e.g., research, archiving).

There were structural and ethical weaknesses in the *Contraception* visitor feedback system, and they are worth investigating as they illustrate some of the pitfalls when considering such activities in exhibitions.

Weaknesses of the *Contraception* Model

Firstly, we did not seek informed consent because we did not consider the potential value of the comments. In retrospect, as the majority of comments were anonymous and displayed in a public space, there was no danger to the interests of the participants in researching and publishing their words (Wilkinson 2001, 22). However, we missed the opportunity to be more impactful: by seeking informed consent visitors could have felt that their contributions were useful to the museum and sexual health education and research, for example.

Secondly, we did not collect demographic information and authorship. Anonymity can be considered a positive as visitors may have felt less restrained in what they wrote (Pekarik 1997, 57). Conversely, the lack of demographic

data makes it impossible to analyse the comments in relation to age and gender, thereby reducing their value in terms of research.

Thirdly, we rarely documented the wall during the life of the exhibition. Many adjacencies between comments were lost, as were opportunities to see what may have inspired visitors to write particular comments (Noy 2008a, b, 185). In addition, we did not brief Te Papa's hosts on how to deal with the more challenging comments. Many comments appear to have been lost through disposal, without consultation.

Lastly, a significant issue for evaluation purposes was the structural weakness in the framing of our question. The headline "Let's talk about sex" was chosen as a light-hearted attractor to the more serious question: "If you could give your younger self one piece of advice about contraception, what would it be?" These two elements were slightly at odds with each other, and some visitors clearly responded only to the title (the most obvious comment being "Let's talk about sex baby" from the Salt-N-Pepa pop song). However, regardless of the more flip-pant comments about sex, Dame Margaret Sparrow noted "the fact that they're talking about it" was a positive result of the activity (personal communication, 22 January 2016).

METHODOLOGY

The 2239 comments that were saved during the life of the exhibition became my data set for evaluation.⁵ I employed a manual sorting and text analysis method inspired by Livingstone et al. (2001) and Macdonald's approach to assessment of visitor books (2005, 123). I read each comment several times and sorted them into groups of recurring statements and themes. My interpretation of the comments was influenced by my experience as the curator of the exhibition, and my own subject knowledge. I

constantly recalibrated my thinking and sought advice from peers and experts (including Dame Margaret Sparrow) in order to understand and categorise statements written in colloquial language or contemporary slang.⁶ Many of the comments could have been categorised differently.

Ten overarching categories were developed in consultation with Edith MacDonald, former Head of Visitor Insights and Learning at Te Papa. Within the ten categories there were smaller themes and topics, and sometimes a range of orientations from positive to negative. Each comment was sorted into only one category according to its most dominant message. There were not enough resources to attempt more complex coding such as cross-referencing. However, as has been observed with this method in the past, the category results were useful in demonstrating the *range* of visitor experiences and attitudes in terms of contraception (Livingstone et al. 2001, 360; Pekarik 1997; Worts 1995).

In broad categories and percentages, the comments focus on:

1. Contraception, safer sex (19.5%)
2. Emotional safety (love, respect, consent, empowerment) (19%)
3. Education (including cautionary tales) (12.5%)
4. Sex, sexuality, sexual orientation (9.5%)
5. Sexual practices (7%)
6. Abstinence (5.5%)
7. Personal histories, reflections (3%)
8. The exhibition (1.5%)

9. Other (ambiguous, tenuous, irreverent, spurious) (16.5%)
10. Nothing relevant (e.g., scribbles, spoiled papers, incomplete words, nonsensical or irrelevant statements, and tag-like graffiti) (6%)

In summary, the majority of comments were relevant to the question and/or title (77.5%). The rest were tenuous, ambiguous, irreverent, spurious (16.5%), or scribbles, incomplete or nonsensical words, and irrelevant statements (6%). These two categories could be dismissed from the analysis, but at 22.5% they have a substantial presence in the overall count (Macdonald 2005, 127).

Analysis of Comments

The range of responses was hugely varied from graffiti-like scribbles to thoughtful advice.

Most comments were in English. Four were written in the Māori language, three in Samoan, and twelve in other languages.

There was a variety of stylistic differences (Figure 5). Most comments were hand-written text in pencil consisting of short pithy statements or quotes. A few larger statements were squeezed into the small round pieces of paper. Some comments were embellished with sketches. The most commonly drawn image was a penis.

Some writers revealed their gender or sexual orientation, but very few supplied names or demographic information. Handwriting sometimes gave an impression of age. Comments featuring contemporary slang and popular culture references appeared to have been written by younger visitors.

Visitors' motivations to write appeared to have been manifold. The provocative title motivated some, whereas the introspective question motivated others. Visitors may have been motivated to read others' comments because of



Figure 5. Visitor comments from *Contraception*. Photo: Stephanie Gibson. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

powerful or emotive language, and were inspired to write their own (Mazda 2004, 133). Others simply wanted to make their mark, which could be described as tagging or graffiti.

Macdonald writes about the “imagined receivers” of comment writers (2005, 126). Many visitors wrote to themselves as directed by the question (“I’m proud of you! You’re doing everything right xx future you”). Sometimes they wrote to specific people or to their companions, for example these dual comments by a mother and child visiting together: “Remember your mother was right”/“Yes, I am (your mother!)”.

Visitors wrote messages in reaction to other comments, or added their reactions to others already in place: some of the comments counter-act or “talk” to each other in this way (Figure 6):

“I was the MOTHER of the result of the failed pill. Best Ever thing to happen”

“I was the result of a failed Pill!”

Macdonald notes that reading other people’s comments may help visitors “formulate their own position in relation to those of others” (2005, 125). For example, several comments were counteracted by unimpressed readers (in italics):

“Don’t have sex with someone you have just met”/“*Judgie!*”

“Use the pull out method. . .”/“*Doesn’t work!*”

There were many rhymes and sayings, particularly about condom wearing (e.g., “Don’t be silly wrap your willy”). Several comments referenced popular culture such as slogans (Nike’s “Just do it”), quotes from movies (“Don’t have sex, because you will get pregnant and die” from *Mean Girls*), and music (e.g., Ice Cube’s “Check yourself before you wreck yourself”).

A small group of comments were ignorant about sex or discriminatory, including negative attitudes towards women. Even though such

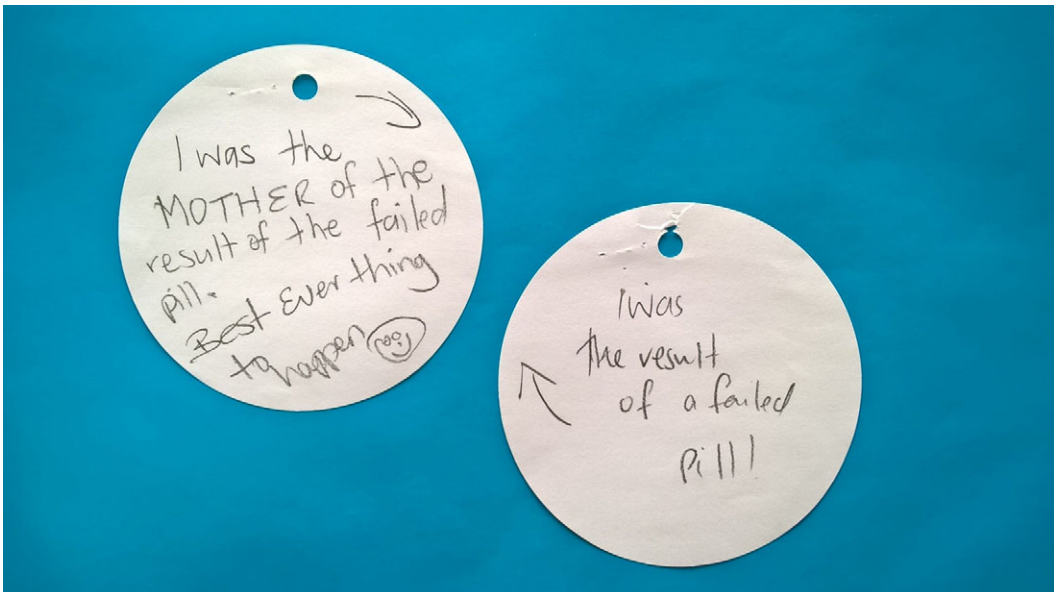


Figure 6. Visitor comments from *Contraception*. Photo: Stephanie Gibson. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

comments could be dismissed as a minority, Dame Margaret noted that they sent a “clear message regarding the need for education” (personal communication, 22 January 2016).

The following tables offer a more detailed thematic and statistical breakdown of the comments with selected observations.⁷ Unless stated, the themes are positively orientated.

Contraception, safer sex

“Be Wise, Condomise”

“Keep yourself safe. Understand the consequences of unsafe sex”

Promoting the use of contraception and safer sex constituted the largest category of comments (19.5%) (Table 1). The simplest message was “Use it!”

Different methods of contraception were promoted by visitors, with condoms far outweighing every other method. Nine percent of the total comments called for condom use, of which half rhymed (e.g., “Don’t be a fool wrap your tool,” “No glove no love”). In contrast, only

one comment noted that “girls can wear condoms to” (sic).

Apart from condoms, comments on male contraception were rare, focusing on a male pill and vasectomies (“Man up. Get a vasectomy. She will [heart] u for it”).

A small group of comments favoured having babies over using contraception. Very few visitors commented on abortion, possibly because this topic was not explored in the exhibition.

Emotional safety

“There is no condom big enough to protect your heart”

“Don’t be afraid to say no to any man or person and mean it. Sexual violation is shocking and upsetting”

The next largest category of comments (19%) comes under the broad umbrella of emotional safety, and includes sexual politics (Table 2). Many visitors called for respect and empowerment, with comments on consent revealing its complexities:

Table 1.
Responses related to contraception, safe sex

Comment code	#
Pro condom use, using lube (*including condom rhymes)	201 (*96)
Safer sex, being careful, thinking first (4 from LGBT perspective)	99
Pro contraception in general (e.g., “Use it!”)	38
Promoting different devices and methods (e.g., implants, emergency contraception, Depo Provera)	28
Pro the contraceptive pill (“You! Pill! Now. Make that appointment & get your pills before your date.”)	19
Promoting the use of two methods of contraception (e.g., pill + condom)	13
Anti-contraception (e.g., “No need, babies are love, babies are life”)	11
Promoting vasectomy (6); male pill (4)	10
Abortion: 5 against; 4 pro with two counteracted (“Abortion is the way to go”/“ <i>NO its NOT!!</i> ”)	9
Pro non-hormonal methods (e.g., natural family planning)	6
Sharing responsibility for contraception (“Contraception is not one partner’s problem. It’s a partnership.”)	6
TOTAL	440

Table 2.
Responses related to emotional safety

Comment code	#
Respect and love for self and others (including fidelity); owning and valuing your body ("Know your worth")	106
Waiting, being ready (for sex, relationships, parenthood), maturity, self-awareness, choosing carefully	95
Consent, resisting pressure ("CONSENT! No means no!")	79
Love, sexual intimacy, romance ("All sex really is, is allowing yourself to be as intimate as humanely possible with another human being")	29
Fear, reassurance (e.g., "Just relax & let it go...")	21
Trust issues ("Don't accept 'Trust Me', Be SAFE")	19
Societal pressures and reputation ("Don't feel condemned by society's view of sex i.e., How many partners, waiting until marriage")	14
Sexual politics (including debates about the use of the words "virginity" and "slut")	12
Life beyond sex ("Get a job, create a future for yourself")	11
First sexual experiences (reassurance)	8
Shame, embarrassment ("Don't ever feel bad, dirty or guilty for trying to protect yourself. If you're okay with it, that's good.")	6
Violence, rape, incest, sexual predators (e.g., "Men rape")	5
Privacy ("Don't tell everyone about your sex life")	5
Sex versus love ("Don't mistake SEX for Love")	3
Other	5
TOTAL	418

"Consent is mandatory. It is an enthusiastic yes, not the absence of a no"

"Consent is a continuum. One yes does not mean yes to everything!"

"Consent, consent, consent! It's okay to say no at any point!!!!"

Many writers advised waiting to have sex until ready, or with "someone special" ("There's no rush. Sex will be there when you are ready").

Some visitors debated the sexual politics of the word "slut" and the concept of virginity, for example (Figure 7):

"Having sex with lots of people doesn't make you a SLUT! (Slut is a made up word)"

"There shouldn't be any pressure to lose your virginity!" ("*Virginity is a social construct to control women!*")

Education

"Never be afraid to ask questions"

"You won't learn enough about it in school"

The question we posed in the exhibition essentially asked visitors to "educate" their younger selves, and some of their answers reflect the education and sources of sexual knowledge that they themselves had received.

This category ranges from comments calling for formal sex education in schools to informal learning (e.g., asking for advice). Many visitors advised their younger selves and readers to research their contraceptive options and to know their bodies:

"Sex & relationship education should be compulsory from a young age—consent & respect are essential! Contraception should be free worldwide. Advice: Arm yourself with knowledge & stay safe!"

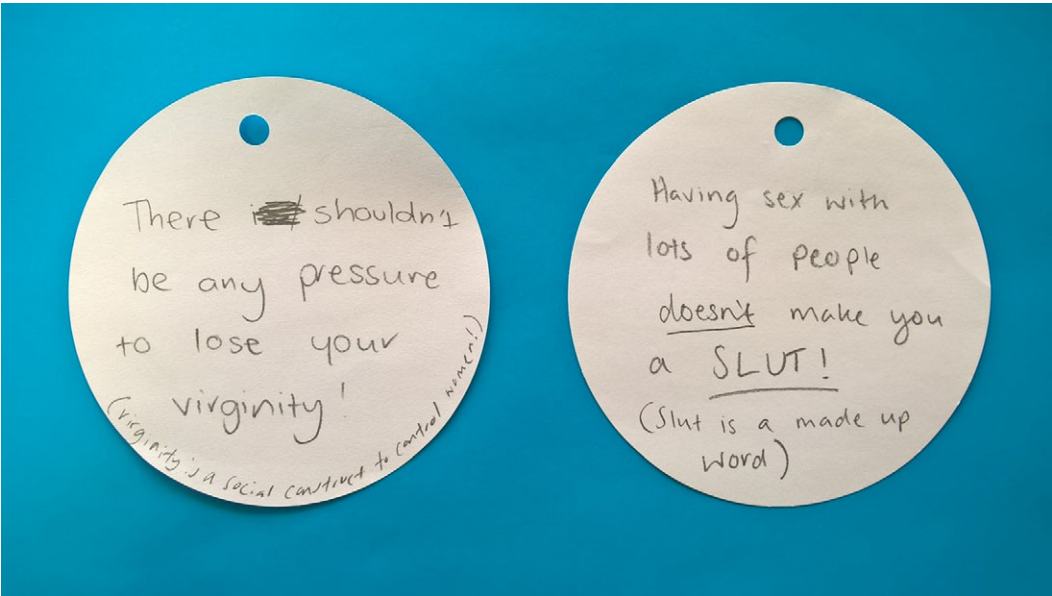


Figure 7. Visitor comments from *Contraception*. Photo: Stephanie Gibson. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Table 3.
Responses related to education

Comment code	#
Ask for advice and talk to others (e.g., parents, family planning); research options; learn from experiences	71
Problems with methods (the contraceptive pill, Depo Provera, IUDs, emergency contraception, condoms, rhythm method)	63
Pregnancy, babies and parenthood: risks, difficulties, issues ("Babies are really hard work. Like really really really hard work")	41
Warnings against STIs and HIV/AIDS; getting checked; hygiene	36
Advice against certain practices (e.g., sex with animals, anal sex, oral sex, withdrawal method, sex in public)	28
Advice on intercourse and orgasm ("I pleasure you = you pleasure me! (end of story)")	17
Risky behaviours around drugs and getting drunk (e.g., "don't have sex when you're too drunk to put on a condom")	10
Sex education ("Teach it to kids!!")	7
Pornography (2 pro; 3 against)	5
TOTAL	278

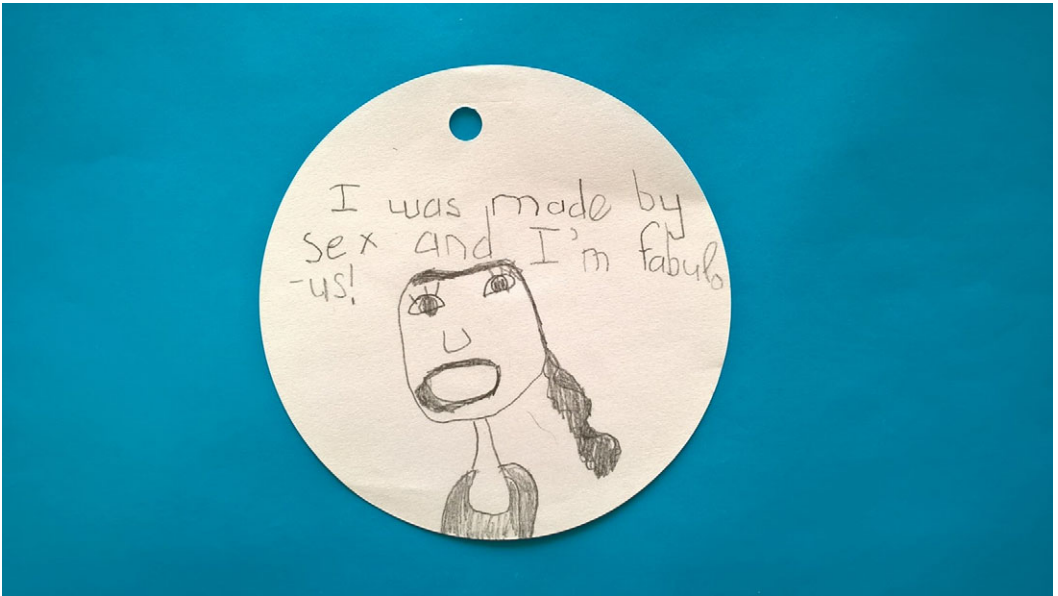


Figure 8. Visitor comment from *Contraception*. Photo: Stephanie Gibson. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

This category also includes “cautionary tales” such as the risks of pregnancy and parenthood, particular contraceptive methods and sexual practices, and sexually transmitted infections (Table 3).

Sex, sexuality, sexual orientation

“I was made by sex and I’m fabulous!”
(Figure 8)

“If you’re unsure about your sexuality, you don’t have to have sex to ‘determine once and for all’. You don’t have to prove anything, to anyone.”

There were many positive comments about sex as an activity, and about sexuality (Table 4).

Most of the comments reinforced the dominant heterosexual perspective of the exhibition. Just over one percent of the comments came from LGBTI perspectives (including safer sex messages in the first

category). Several writers promoted lesbianism as a contraceptive in itself.

Sexual practices

“Do more than missionary”

The comments in this category traversed a wide range of sexual practices (Table 5). The majority of comments about anal sex were from a heterosexual perspective in terms of avoiding pregnancy.

Abstinence

“The BEST contraception is NO SEX!!”

Several visitors advised abstinence, or waiting to have sex until after marriage (Table 6). This category also includes a small number of comments from people who had never had sex.

Personal histories, reflections

“Wait. You were definitely too young. He didn’t love you.”

“One terrible moment is not you or your life. Get up in the morning, go for that run, smile, love yourself & leave the past behind you” (Figure 9)

This category contains personal and reflective comments (Table 7).

Philosophical comments such as “YOLO” (“you only live once”) counted as advice, although it is impossible to know the writer’s meaning in relation to contraception.

The exhibition

“Bring da boyz here for the field trip!”

Very few comments referenced the exhibition itself, mainly because the question was not about the exhibition. Some comments could be linked to the objects and themes on display (e.g., “chocolate flavoured condoms are a bit weird”). A few comments praised Dame Margaret Sparrow directly. Only two comments were negative about the exhibition, including, “One day a real judgy museum exhibit is going to assume you’ve made some poor life choices” (Table 8).

Other

“Being gay keeps the babies away”

This large, wide-ranging category covers any comments which could be linked to the exhibition themes in some way, however ambiguous, tangential or spurious (Table 9).

Table 4.
Responses related to sex, sexuality, sexual orientation

Comment code	#
Fun, enjoyment, happiness, pleasure (includes “Sex is good” written twice across 18 circles of paper)	96
Have more sex; have many partners; make the most of libido. Includes 20 variations of “Just do it” (possibly in answer to the title “Let’s talk about sex”)	77
Sexual orientation (mainly gay and lesbian). Three comments favouring asexuality.	29
Sex as procreation (e.g., “Have babies, sex is good”)	9
Other (e.g., “Kissing is sex”)	6
TOTAL	217

Table 5.
Responses related to sexual practices

Comment code	#
Anal sex (including 42 variations of “Up the bum = no babies”)	84
Oral sex (“Oral is great too!”)	26
Various (e.g., “Toys are great!”)	15
Withdrawal (“We use the withdrawal method—no pills”)	14
Masturbation (“Masturbation is normal”)	8
Foreplay (“Do NOT neglect foreplay!”)	5
TOTAL	152

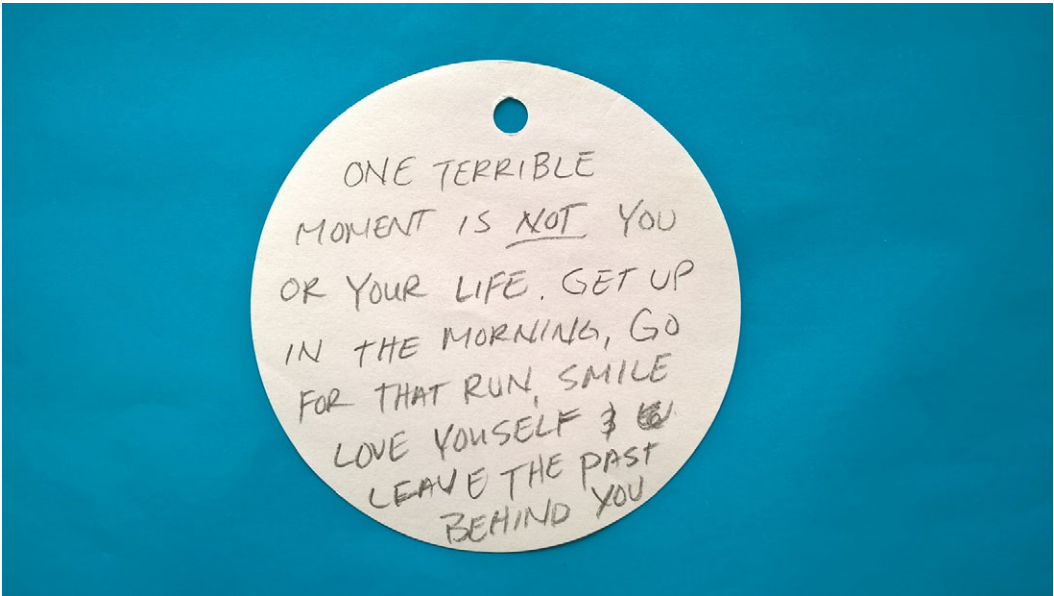


Figure 9. Visitor comment from *Contraception*. Photo: Stephanie Gibson. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

Table 6.
Responses related to abstinence

Comment code	#
Abstinence, rejecting sex (one counteracted)	38
Waiting to have sex until after marriage	35
Abstaining because sex could lead to pregnancy and/or death (inspired by the <i>Mean Girls</i> film) (also includes one mention of AIDS)	15
Waiting or abstaining from a religious perspective (one counteracted)	11
Ambiguous as to whether message was about abstinence or anti-contraception (e.g., "Don't do it")	11
Virginity, celibacy, chastity	14
TOTAL	124

Table 7.
Responses related to personal history/reflections

Comment code	#
Reflective, hindsight (e.g., "You can sometimes get it wrong—Learn & move on")	24
Philosophical (e.g., "YOLO," you only live once)	13
Pride ("I'm proud of you!")	10
Positive outcomes of contraceptive failures ("If it doesn't work...pregnancy isn't the end of the world. Don't stress.")	9
Regrets ("He definitely wasn't worth it")	7
Independence and choice (e.g., women's liberation) ("We are so lucky now—so many options for women to live independently...")	6
TOTAL	69

Not relevant

I also note the number of comments which were coded as not relevant because they were unreadable (*n* = 89), bore no relation to the exhibition such as the greeting “hi” (*n* = 25), or contained irrelevant information such as “Bring back 80’s power metal” (*n* = 25). There were 139 irrelevant comments in total.

CONNECTION TO FORMAL EVALUATION FINDINGS

Overall, the majority of visitors’ comments in *Contraception* indicated positive and/or constructive engagement with the topics of contraception, sex, sexuality and

sexual health, and demonstrated a wide range of attitudes, values, behaviours, experiences and concerns.

These findings complemented, but did not connect directly to, our formative and summative evaluations of the exhibition. This is because of two reasons. Firstly, the comments were written in answer to a specific personalised question about contraception and not about the exhibition itself. Secondly, the analysis of the comments was not part of a coherent evaluation strategy at the outset of the exhibition project, and was only undertaken once we realised how much rich data had amassed.

The formative evaluation was conducted to determine the main approach and tone for the exhibition, and whether visitors would

Table 8.
Responses related to the exhibition

Comment code	#
Comments directly referencing the title “Let’s talk about sex”	13
Thanks to Dame Margaret Sparrow	6
Positive towards exhibition (“Great interesting, important exhibition”)	4
Influenced by content of exhibition	4
Negative towards the exhibition and/or participatory activity	2
TOTAL	29

Table 9.
Responses related broadly to sex, sexuality and orientation

Comment code	#
Ambiguous, tenuous, uncertain meaning	133
Facile, facetious or flippant (e.g., “Free the nipple”)	71
Irreverent, crude	48
Spurious claims, irresponsible advice (e.g., not using condoms); idea that homosexuality prevents pregnancy (one counteracted)	43
Naming and shaming	27
Penis drawings	21
Hook ups (names and phone numbers for sex)	17
Lost connections (comments that responded to others, but were incomplete on their own)	9
Menstruation (“I am beautiful even when blood pours out of me”)	4
TOTAL	373

participate in writing comments. Sixty percent of interviewees wanted the exhibition approach to focus on liberation and freedom (MacDonald 2015), whereas very few comments mentioned this theme (there are six such comments in the “Personal histories, reflections” category). Eighty-three percent of interviewees preferred a serious tone for the exhibition (MacDonald 2015), but humour, light-heartedness and flippancy are present in many of the visitors’ comments. However, this disparity is difficult to quantify due to the lack of cross-referencing in the manual analysis method. Eighty-three percent of formative interviewees indicated they would answer a question about contraception in the exhibition, but it was impossible to test this finding as visitor numbers to the exhibition were not collected (MacDonald 2015). However, the fact that there were only two negative comments written about the participatory activity possibly indicates a high level of engagement.

The summative evaluation focused on visitors’ impressions of the exhibition in order to determine its impacts. The main findings were that most visitors had come across the exhibition by chance; generally the exhibition did not change their thinking about contraception; most identified the objects as being the most memorable parts of the exhibition; a third knew about Dame Margaret Sparrow before visiting; and the majority would like to see similar exhibitions about social issues at Te Papa in the future (Gibson 2015). The analysis of the visitor comments barely aligns with these findings. Only 29 comments are about the exhibition (1.5%), of which only two mention objects in the exhibition and six mention Dame Margaret. Only one visitor commented on wanting to see similar exhibitions (“This is [sic] the kind of exhibitions you ought to be making Te Papa A+++”).

CONCLUSIONS

Opportunities to comment in exhibitions can be an effective method for engaging visitors. The right questions plus user-friendly tools can produce a wealth of material that is unique, unexpected, and potentially helpful to research, future iterations of exhibitions, and forward planning. With this in mind, museum staff (e.g., curators, writers, designers, educators, and audience specialists), and external experts when relevant, need to work together to determine how best to frame questions for visitors which will provide a worthwhile experience within the exhibition, but also result in useful data for analysis and research (Livingstone et al. 2001).

The success of the participatory activity in *Contraception* lay in its simplicity and in visitors’ willingness to write personal responses. But its failure lay in our not anticipating the value of their contributions, particularly in terms of sexual health education and audience research, or the potential for impact such an activity can have on visitors themselves. We did not consider seeking consent or demographic information, which could have increased the motivation to respond if people knew their comments were useful. We did not allocate research resources to understanding and sharing this material because we had not planned a coherent evaluation strategy for the exhibition. We need to embed and commit to these processes if we want to maximise our engagement with audiences and leave a meaningful and useful record.

That said, our question “If you could give your younger self one piece of advice about contraception, what would it be?” provided an effective forum for public conversation, and inspired many responses which are usually absent from the museum. The resulting mass of material provided a rich set of data to complement our formal

evaluation findings, and sent a clear message that exhibitions such as *Contraception* can provide museums with the opportunity to contribute to the health and wellbeing of their communities and the conversations around them. **END**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks go to Dame Margaret Sparrow for her generous advice and support throughout the project, and to Jen Grove (Exeter University) and Claire Regnault (Senior Curator History, Te Papa) for considering an early draft—their insights have greatly improved this paper as have the expert peer reviewers. I thank Edith MacDonald (former Head of Visitor Insights and Learning, Te Papa) for encouraging me to undertake the research. I also thank Lee Davidson of Victoria University for her advice on ethics, and Te Papa's librarians for providing resources.

NOTES

1. The exhibition was on display in the Ilott Room, level 4, Te Papa, Wellington, New Zealand, from 29 May 2015 to 31 January 2016. Dame Margaret Sparrow is one of New Zealand's leading sexual-health doctors and birth-control advocates. Throughout her career in public health from the 1960s to 2000s, she collected over one thousand contraceptive objects dating back to the late nineteenth century. The exhibition showcased nearly 150 of these objects.
2. Our project was not unique. For example, in 1995 the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, Australia, developed and toured the exhibition *Taking Precautions: the story of contraception*. Visitors' comments were collected and archived, but not yet analysed (personal communication with curator Tilly Boleyn, 15 March 2016). Two recent British exhibitions about sex and sexuality included contraceptive material and featured visitor feedback systems which are currently being analysed by Dr Jen Grove of Exeter University (*Institute of Sexology*, Wellcome Collection, London, 2014–15;

and *Intimate Worlds: exploring sexuality through the Sir Henry Wellcome collection*, Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter, United Kingdom, 2014). Initial analysis suggests visitors similarly welcomed the chance to think through and express a wide range of ideas about sex through the forum of a visitor comment system (personal communication with curator/researcher Jen Grove, April 2016).

3. URL: <http://antenna.sciencemuseum.org.uk/ab> out, accessed 6 December 2016.
4. 20 visitors participated in the formative evaluation (with 212 in an associated online survey), and 35 participated in the summative evaluation (Gibson 2015; MacDonald 2015).
5. In total, 4050 paper circles were cut (about 50 were hand-cut when the first batch of 2000 ran out). 445 were unused and 2239 comments were saved (of which about 90 were written on both sides of the circles), indicating that possibly about 1400 comments were disposed of, or the circles of paper were used for other purposes.
6. Urban Dictionary was particularly helpful in this regard (<http://www.urbandictionary.com>).
7. The analysis and interpretation are my own. Much more could be gleaned from this material than is possible to deliver in this paper.

REFERENCES

- Cameron, F. 2005. "Contentiousness and Shifting Knowledge Paradigms: The Roles of History and Science Museums in Contemporary Societies." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 20(3): 213–33.
- Cameron, F., and L. Kelly, eds. 2010. *Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Davidson, L. 2015. "Visitor Studies: Toward a Culture of Reflective Practice and Critical Museology for the Visitor-Centered Museum." In *The International Handbooks of Museum Studies*, edited by C. McCarthy, 503–27. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
- Ellison, J. 2010. "Controversies in Context: Communication, Hot Topics and Museums

- in Canada." In *Hot Topics, Public Culture, Museums*, edited by F. Cameron and L. Kelly, 176–93. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Gammon, B., and X. Mazda. 2009. The Power of the Pencil: Renegotiating the Museum-Visitor Relationship through Discussion Exhibits at the Science Museum, London, *Exhibitionist (Fall)* 2: 26–33.
- Hein, G. E. 1998. *Learning in the Museum*. London: Routledge.
- Livingstone, P.E. Pedretti, and B. J. Soren. 2001. "Visitor Comments and the Socio-Cultural Context of Science: Public Perceptions and the Exhibition A Question of Truth." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 19(4): 355–69.
- Macdonald, S. 2005. "Accessing Audiences: Visiting Visitor Books." *Museum and Society* 3(3): 119–36.
- Mazda, X. 2004. "Dangerous Ground? Public Engagement with Scientific Controversy." In *Creating Connections: Museums and the Public Understanding of Current Research*, edited by D. Chittenden, G. Farmelo and B. V. Lewenstein. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.
- Museums Aotearoa. 2016. *Service IQ New Zealand Museum Awards 2016*. New Zealand.
- Noy, C. 2008a. "Pages as Stages: A Performance Approach to Visitor Books." *Annals of Tourism Research* 35(2): 509–28.
- . 2008b. "Mediation Materialized: The Semiotics of a Visitor Book at an Israeli Commemoration Site." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25(2): 175–95.
- Patel, M., C. Heath, P. Luff, and D. vom Lehn, and J. Cleverly. 2016. "Playing with Words: Creativity and Interaction in Museums and Galleries." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 31(1): 69–86.
- Pedretti, E., and B. J. Soren. 2003. "A Question of Truth: A Cacophony of Visitor Voices." *Journal of Museum Education* 28(3): 17–20.
- Pekarik, A. J. 1997. "Understanding Visitor Comments: The Case of Flight Time Barbie." *Curator: The Museum Journal* 40(1): 56–68.
- Skydsgaard, M. A., H. M. Andersen, and H. King. 2016. "Designing Museum Exhibits That Facilitate Visitor Reflection and Discussion." *Museum Management and Curatorship* 31(1): 48–68.
- Wilkinson, T. M. 2001. "The Core Ideas of Research Ethics." In "*Research Ethics in Aotearoa New Zealand: Concepts, Practice, Critique*," edited by M. Tolich, 13–24. New Zealand: Pearson Education.
- Worts, D. 1995. "Extending the Frame: Forging a New Partnership with the Public." *Art in Museums* 5: 164–91.

UNPUBLISHED SOURCES

- Gibson, S. 2015. *Visitor Experience Evaluation Report Contraception*. EP-EX-Margaret Sparrow Exhibition-Visitor Market Research, Te Papa.
- MacDonald, E. 2015. *Margaret Sparrow Evaluation Write-Up*. GV-OS-18-01, Te Papa.
- Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. 2015. *B1 Story & Experience (Hidden Histories: Dame Margaret Sparrow's Contraceptive Collection)*. EP-EX-Margaret Sparrow Exhibition-Story & Experience Development-General, Te Papa.