

MP to query gynaecological examinations

Virginity tests on immigrants at Heathrow

By Melanie Phillips, Social Services Correspondent

Immigrant women are being subjected to intimate gynaecological examination on entry to Britain. The Home Office claims that this helps them to identify women attempting to enter the country illegally.

It says that medical evidence produced by such examinations enable the immigration authorities to decide whether the women are bona fide fiancées, entitled to enter without going through lengthy clearance procedure, or whether they are married. In that case they would need special clearance—an entry certificate granted in their country of origin.

The Home Office admits that in a specific case, of which the Guardian has details, an examination was conducted to "determine whether the woman was a fiancée."

The clear implication is that if a Hindu woman was found to be a virgin—which in this case she was—she would be believed to be unmarried; and that if she was found to be not a virgin she would be believed to be married.

The Home Office confirmed last night that an examination was conducted by a port medical officer on a 35-year-old Indian schoolteacher who arrived at Heathrow last week. The woman, who was brought from India by her fiancé, signed a form which gave her consent to "a gynaecological examination, which may be vaginal if necessary."

The woman, who has asked not to be named, told the Guardian she only signed because she was not familiar with British law and was frightened that she would be sent back to Delhi.

Miss Jo Richardson, Labour MP for Barking, who has said she is "appalled by this monstrous practice," is to raise the matter in the Commons. A gynaecologist said last night that the case sounded "obscene."

The woman teacher said that soon after arrival she was sent for a medical examination by immigration officials. A woman who spoke Hindi told her to take off all her clothes. "Then a man doctor came in. I asked to be seen by a lady doctor, but they said no."

She was given nothing with which to cover herself. "I asked for a dressing gown but it was not provided. I was most reluctant to have the examination, but I didn't know whether it was normal practice here. The doctor said, through the nurse interpreter, that he thought I had been pregnant before, and I said that before marriage no Indian lady would do that sort of thing."

The interpreter then translated the consent form for her, and she signed it. "I was frightened that otherwise they would send me back." The doctor then began to examine her.

"He was wearing rubber gloves and took some medicine out of a tube and put it on some cotton and inserted it into me. He said he was deciding whether I was pregnant now or had been pregnant before. I said that he could see that without doing anything to me, but he said there was no need to get shy.

"I have been feeling very bad mentally ever since. I was very embarrassed and upset. I had never had a gynaecological examination before."

The Home Office disputes some facts. A spokesman said last night that the woman had been given only a cursory examination that was not internal. She had not been required to remove all her clothes. Under immigration rules, potential immigrants

could be examined by medical officers at the ports.


"An immigration officer may not be satisfied that a passenger is who he or she says they are and may think they are seeking admission by deception," the spokesman said. "In this case the officer referred this passenger to the port medical officer to see whether she was, in fact, a bona fide virgin, or fiancée. After a cursory examination the medical officer said that these suspicions could be removed.

"The medical officer concerned has informed us that there was no internal examination and that he very quickly and decently established that she was virgo intacto. If a woman refused such an examination," he said, "this would be taken into account" but she would not be refused entry solely on that account.

The port medical officers, he said, send the examination results back to the immigration officials, and the records would probably be maintained in a confidential way. "It is not standard practice for all immigrant women. It depends on the immigration officer and whether or not he is satisfied that the passenger is all he or she claims to be." Passengers were not normally asked for their consent to such examinations and he had not been able

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● Below : The consent form used by the Immigration Office.



HM IMMIGRATION OFFICE
Terminal 3 London (Heathrow) Airport Hounslow
Middlesex TW6 1ND

Telephone 01-897 9631 ext

Your reference


Our reference

Date 24.1.79

This is to certify that I Miss _____ agree to a gynaecological examination which may be a vaginal if necessary.

This statement has been read to me in my own mother tongue and is fully understood by me.

Signed _____

Witnessed  S. RABINOFFER.

Airport officials hold virginity screenings

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to establish why this had been done in this case.

Minority groups have long claimed that immigrant women have been subjected to such examinations. Miss Mary Dines, who once worked for the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants at Heathrow, said yesterday that in 1968 she had been told by immigration officials that they had found out whether two immigrant girls were virgins or not.

She had been so horrified, she said, that she approached Mr Merlyn Rees, then a junior Minister at the Home Office, who had told her, when she said she could provide chapter and verse, that he would do something about it.

Mr Robert Winston, a gynaecologist at Hammersmith Hospital, said last night that the teacher's examination seemed

scandalous and almost obscene. He disputed the Home Office's insistence that the examination had not been internal.

"If a doctor takes a lubricant out of a tube and puts on gloves, then what else can he be going to do?" he said. "Any kind of internal examination for a woman can be extremely emotional and psychologically disturbing and cannot be the equivalent of, for example, listening to the heart. This is even more so for a Hindu."

Moreover, he added, the examination described by the woman would not prove whether she had ever been pregnant, would not conclusively prove whether she was pregnant at the time, and might not even prove whether she was a virgin. He also questioned the validity of the consent form.