Intersex, Fetal Dex, and the Disordered Medical World

Intersex is a fairly new term to describe atypical genital anatomy but it has recently been usurped in the medical world by "Disorders of Sex Development." This presentation will explore the negative and positive implications of calling it DSD as well as expose two current controversies in the treatment of intersex. The first storm erupted with the realization that a New York doctor was recommending dexamethasone, a steroid that the FDA has not approved for this use, to pregnant women at risk of bearing babies with congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH). CAH girls are often born with a large clitoris, and prenatal dex, as it is called, can mitigate this condition, precluding the “need” for surgery to reduce it. The second controversy also involves sexual anatomy, specifically a physician’s medical management of clitoral reduction. It is useful to view these recent controversies over clitoral size and sexuality in the broader historical context of attitudes toward intersex people, noticing particularly the unfortunate fear of homosexuality.

Biography
Professor Reis received her BA from Smith College in 1980, her MA in History from Brown University in 1982, and her PhD from UC Berkeley in 1991. Elizabeth Reis is currently working on a book tentatively titled Sex Surgeries: History, Gender, and Medicalization. This project will examine American attitudes towards genital surgeries, including neonatal male circumcision, surgeries for female sexual dysfunction today and hysteria in the past, cosmetic vaginal surgery, castration for sex offenders, and transsexual and intersex surgeries.