

# **Current Activities/Services of the Vancouver Women's Health Collective**

## **Activities supporting a province-wide voice for women.**

### **The development of a Provincial Women's Health Lobby (PWHL)**

The PWHL was started at the Vancouver Women's Health Collective's Women's Health Conference in the fall of 1992. The structure of the lobby is intended to draw its strength from the diversity of women's voices in the province. Its first action was a successful lobby for a province-wide conference around the development of a women's health policy in the Ministry of Health. The PWHL is currently lobbying to ensure that the results of this conference are taken back to the community for the prioritization of actions and the development of a comprehensive implementation plan.

The PWHL continues to lobby for operational funding for grassroots women's health organizations to properly reflect the government's New Directions document. In May the PWHL held a day long conference that enabled women from the Vancouver Region to come together and draft policy proposals for the Van. Regional Health Board around women's issues.

As part of the Canadian Women's Health Network, the PWHL is well supported in their efforts to lobby for systemic change in the health care system.

They are currently writing a workbook for women's centres about how to lobby the regional & community health boards.

## **Activities/Services supporting women's rights to health care advocacy.**

### **Research into Need for Health Care Advocates**

In the fall of 1992 the Vancouver Women's Health Collective (VWHC) received a grant from the Ministry of Social Services to conduct a needs assessment around the role of health care advocates. The report generated from this research outlined the overwhelming support and need for health care advocates and eloquently described the gaps in the advocacy processes that presently exist.

The research into the existing services available continues, and an ongoing critique is being developed in conjunction with other community groups.

## **One on One Advocacy Work**

Over the past 17 years the VWHC has offered a telephone help line in addition to informal drop-in advocacy services for women. Through the development of an active advocacy committee, the VWHC plans to widened the base of it's advocacy services. The women of this committee do intensive one on one advocacy work with women around issues of access to health care providers and services, sexual abuse by health care workers, and ways to ensure that every woman gets the quality and choice of health care she wants.

The advocacy committee is in the process of developing a proposal for a health care advocate training program. This program will train both individual health care advocates on site at the health collective, and provide province wide workshops for health care advocates. The program will also generate advocacy information sheets for distribution throughout the province.

**Services that directly enable women to act on their health care choices.**

## **Pre and Post-Abortion Peer-Counseling**

The pre abortion counseling which the VWHC offers, centres on the choices - emotional, physical and financial - available to women at various points in pregnancy. The post-abortion peer-counseling provides support for women in her choice and the possible resulting emotional turmoil.

## **Birth Control Counseling**

The VWHC provides counseling on the various birth control choices a woman has based on her life experiences. The counseling is quite comprehensive in discussing the ramifications of using each of the birth control options currently available. Our counselors are quite conversant in the various natural birth control options, and hold sessions around the use of these options.

**Activities/Services that actively support women's access to health information.**

## **Resource Library**

With the move to a larger space in March 1993, the VWHC's resource library has expanded in it's ability to accommodate more comfortably women

researching their health care choices. The information centre committee continues to solicit funds to add to the over 1,500 titles contained at present in our resource library. The 748 files containing newspaper clippings and medical, research and health journal articles on women's health issues are updated monthly.

Our resource library is opened four times weekly and volunteers are available to help the women who come in. Also, during the hours that the information centre is opened, volunteers answer the help line and research health issue concerns for women who are unable to come into the resource centre.

### **Health Care Practitioner and Therapist Files**

These files contain information about a great many lower mainland health care practitioners and therapists. The file cards provide women with information concerning the location, specialty, existence of a waiting list and sex of the health care practitioner or therapist. The files are composed of forms filled out by the health practitioners & therapist themselves and by women who have used their services. Women are asked to comment on various aspects of their treatment. These forms are designed to allow other women a variety of opinions to help make a decision around the appropriateness of this individual to provide them with treatment options.

The VWHC continues to research various health care practitioners and therapist to ensure a wide base of choice for women. This service has recently been computerized in order to be accessible through the VWHC's health information database. The VWHC is working with other health collectives and women's centres to expand the scope of the files beyond the lower mainland.

### **Educational Workshops/Seminars**

The education committee of the VWHC offers workshops on menopause, PMS, reproductive health concerns, breast cancer, physiology of women, pharmaceutical abuse of women and the politics of the health care industry. These workshops are delivered to all types of women's organizations, unions and the public at large. The VWHC is developing a series of lunch time sessions around several health issues. Our summer film series will be extended and programmed into fall and winter sessions. These revenue generating activities allow the VWHC to deliver free education sessions to those of our community who don't have the resources to access this information any other way.

In addition to these specific activities, the educational committee is in the process of developing a comprehensive feminist health curriculum based on our 44 health issue factsheets, to be used for ongoing public and institutional education.

## **Activities/Services that actively support women's skill development.**

### **Women's skill development and empowerment of women through volunteering.**

The restructuring of the VWHC in the summer of 1992 has allowed our volunteers to be more specific and directed in their skills development. We provide training in advocacy skills, pre and post abortion counseling, birth control counseling, computer software training, administrative skills such as budgeting & timeline implementation, facilitation & workshop delivery, the ability to work within a consensual decision making model, research techniques, anti-racism & heterosexism work and finally, skills around lobbying techniques & organization.

### **The use of the VWHC as a location for various skill training work experiences.**

Over the past year the VWHC has worked in conjunction with various employment skills training programs to provide work experience for women in administrative support work, computer software training and advocacy work. The VWHC is in the process of designing two job training grants. In conjunction with community workers we are designing a desk-top publishing project. This project will provide project based learning for women with no computer skills, resulting in increased computer literacy and marketable work skills in the non-profit job sector. The other job training is for administrative assistants in the non-profit sector. Using project-based learning- from equipment maintenance to timeline development - we are enabling women to become proficient in the day to day running of an office.

## **Educational Publications**

Over the last 13 years the VWHC has produced 12 books on an array of women's health issues. Currently the VWHC is looking for funds to revise these works and translate them into various languages. The publication committee has just received funding to transform our major publication "Avoiding Pregnancy" into pamphlet form and have it translated into Cantonese, Punjabi and Hindi. At present we have three books being edited and prepared for publication; an updated menopause booklet and books on hysterectomy and candida - as with all of our projects the actual publication of these books will depend on obtaining funds.

Another form of information the VWHC produces are 44 Fact Sheets on a variety of women's health issues from breast cancer to the politics of the health care industry. These fact sheets are, on average, 2 pages in length, - using a feminist critique to outline the basic information available from a wide range of perspectives on various health issues. All of the VWHC's publications, along with hard to find publications on women's health, are available through our mail-order service.

All of the VWHC publications strive to take inaccessible health information, apply a feminist critique, lower literacy level and when translated to provide a culturally - sensitive translation, in order to make it possible for women to inform themselves and thereby make educated health care choices.

## **Computerized Women's Health Information Database**

To increase women's access to alternative and basic health information, the VWHC is developing a computerized health information network to be piloted at women's bookstores and women's centres province wide.

This database contains a wide range of resources - books, pamphlets, information kits, videos, films, ect. - available on various health issues; local and provincial community resources & advocacy routes; a symptom listing to help assess environmental and occupational health concerns; and an issues forum for networking on the computerized bulletin board.

The system is being designed to be user friendly, cost effective, physically accessible and to be used with all kinds of computer hardware and software. The VWHC proposes that this system be used in conjunction with community health care advocates.