

History of The Vancouver Women's Health Collective

The Health Collective has been operating for over 21 years. The focus and nature of the work being done has gone through many changes during that time.

This is our Herstory

In the fall of 1971, a woman angry and dissatisfied with the health care she had received from her doctor ran an ad in the local women's paper hoping to meet other women with similar experiences. From this ad a group of women met to share their frustrations and continued to meet into the winter of 1972. While designing a questionnaire to obtain and share information about women's experience with doctors, specific women's health issues became priorities, such as birth control, vaginal infections and so forth. Out of this our first self-educational health group began. We were determined to explore and develop our own capabilities of doing things for ourselves.

In the spring of 1972 we moved into a house which was called A Women's Place. A small group of women who had been doing abortion referrals since even before 1969 (when the Canadian laws concerning abortions were changed), joined the collective at this time. By December, the collective opened Canada's first women's self-help clinic, using space at a free clinic one night a week. Also during that summer, with a government grant, we distributed the questionnaire about doctors to a large number of women in Vancouver.

In March, 1973 we moved to a new location. At this time our activities included 1) the health information phone line, 2) abortion counselling and referral services, 3) health educational groups, 4) the women's self-help clinic, and 5) public presentations for community groups. A year later, the collective moved to another new location in a warehouse at 6th Avenue and Granville. We renovated for one month to include meeting rooms, a health information area, a child care space and rooms for fitting diaphragms.

The women's self-help clinic continued to operate, for a time out of offices at the Seymour Medical Building. This arrangement was discontinued when the doctors at the Seymour were unwilling to deal with the political context from which we worked, particularly, our critical perspective of the health care system and traditional medical practices were unacceptable to them.

Federal funding was terminated by 1976 and partial provincial funding became the main source until April, 1978, when provincial funding was granted. In the summer of 1977, the collective moved again, to West Broadway, where we remained until December of 1984. For a time after January, 1978, we closed to reassess our emphasis on services (the self-help clinic, abortion and health counselling, and diaphragm fitting) versus our original emphasis on self-help maintained through educational work. While the clinic was a good service for women, it did not encourage self-help nor did it encourage women to demand what they were entitled to from the health care system. At the clinic, women

received good care from volunteers and more time would be spent with the women there than if they had gone to a doctor's office. Doctors passed on their work to us freeing up their time for more patients and therefore more money. Out of this evaluation came a redefined set of goals and a decision to close the clinic. We wanted to maintain our ideal of practical health in a different way and our philosophy to be more explicit about our political position.

A demonstration took place and our service-oriented groups became autonomous to the health collective. The core workers began extensive research of the health care system and developed a series of topics for presentations.

During 1978-82 a health series was organized to encourage new women to join in the research and information sharing. From these groups a health series was developed with an emphasis on our political perspective and in the context of women's health. Some health topics included: Health Care Industry, Drug Industry, Psycho tropic Drugs, Politics of Birth Control, Politics of Cancer, Health Hazards, of Video Display Terminals, PID (Pelvic Inflammatory Disease), Ovulation Method of birth control and Menopause. In 1982 the Women's Occupational Health Group developed and wanted to share information on health hazards (particularly health hazards that effect the reproductive system) of clerical and health care workers. By 1983, after extensive research, a booklet on PID was written and published.

As information was researched and gathered, it was organized and filed , and the Collective set up the Resource Centre. To encourage women to get involved, a training program was set up to incorporate unpaid workers into the resource centre. There was an emphasis to decentralize and different groups continued, but the main focus was to build up the available information of the Resource Centre. While continuing to experiment with different politics and programs, several aspects of the Collective have been maintained over the years, for example, our critical perspective of the health care industry, one or several health information groups meeting at different times, and our collective structure.

In August of 1983, 100% of our provincial funding was cut with one month's notice. The Collective was able to keep going through an emergency grant from the City of Vancouver and donations from individuals. In January of 1984, a grant from the Promotion Directorate of Health and Welfare Canada was received for a large Self-help project for five health topics: PMS, DES (a drug given to pregnant women in the 40's and 50's and 60's), cervical health, vaginal health, breast health and Menopause. The grant involved development of workshops and information packets on each health topic as well as travel to other parts of the province, Alberta and the Yukon, to present these workshops. There has been one project grant from Secretary of State for this training manual from October, 1984. Grants which "top-up" unemployment insurance benefits from Canada Works and VIP have been used to keep paid workers. Most of the other members are volunteers.

In 1992 the Health Collective went through a major restructuring at its Annual General Meeting. A committee structure was introduced and the Core structure dissolved. All volunteers are now encouraged to participate as part of the decision making structure through committees that they work on.

Today the Vancouver Women's Health Collective still struggles to secure core funding from the Government, either through the Ministry of Health or through the Ministry of Women's Equality. To keep operating we still rely on project funding, individual donations, and a yearly casino event.

For project funding the Ministry of Health granted us \$72,000 to have one of our major publications broken down into leaflet form and translated into 3 languages. We were also granted \$9,000 from the Ministry of Social Services to develop a "needs assessment" for a Health Care Advocate. We hope to secure further funding to make the advocate position a reality.

In March of 1993 The Health Collective Made another Move to West 8th Avenue. Our office space is shared with the BC Coalition of Abortion Clinics. We provide meeting space for other women's organizations like "Rape Relief" and "The New Reproductive Technologies Coalition." We continue to operate an information centre which has information on a variety of different women's health issues as well as a referral service. We offer abortion counselling, access to the doctor and therapist directory. Our Education Committee offers public workshops on a variety of issues and we are also in the process of developing a Provincial Women's Health Lobby.

The VWHC has been active in the provincial government's proposed health reform process referred to as New Directions. Raine McKay is a member of the Interim Regional Steering Committee for Vancouver. This group will determine how to operationalize the health reform process and how monies will be allocated on a community level. The collective has initiated a women's health forum to ensure that women understand the health reform process and have a voice in the establishment of more community based and driven health services. Through our networking efforts with other women's organizations we eventually hope to establish a Vancouver women's health coalition.