



The Vancouver Women's Health Collective is the only surviving women's health centre independent of the medical system in Canada. The collective operates as a counselling service, a referral service, a resource centre, and an advocate for women's issues around the community. In providing these services for women, the collective is achieving their primary of helping women help themselves within the medical system. The mission statement for this organization states that the established health care system undermines the needs of women; the collective will lobby and advocate to change this system, and provide women with the resources to make their own health care choices.

The Collective was started in 1972 by a woman who was extremely dissatisfied with the treatment she had received at the hands of the medical system. She advertised in the paper inviting women who had similar experiences, to meet and discuss what they could do to improve the system. The Collective started with the focus on self-help and provided clinical services for women. For example they performed pap tests, pregnancy tests, diaphragm and cap fitting and gave public lectures on important issues like alternative medicine and mental health. During the early 80s, the Collective decided that they could accomplish more if they worked outside of the medical system, rather than working from within. Therefore, they changed their focus to more of a resource based, referral service and advocacy group.

Funding for the Collective is provided by the Ministry of Health, The Ministry of Equality for Women, The City of Vancouver and through intensive fundraising on the part of the volunteers. They also receive grants for certain projects or research they do. Although this may seem like a lot, the Collective works on a very small budget and is currently carrying a substantial debt. There is only enough funding to allow two staff members a salary; one full-time, and one 3/4-time employee.

The collective could not exist without the efforts of volunteers; most of which are post-secondary students, as well as women who are new to the city and unemployed, or on welfare. Volunteers must first fill out an application and be interviewed, and are expected to dedicate at least twelve hours per month to the Collective. They are assigned to one of six committees: Education, Administration, Publication, Information Centre, Fundraising, and Volunteers. All of the committees meet once a year to create a plan of how things will operate during the year. There is a Collective meeting each month to discuss any needed changes.

The Collective is very accessible financially, with membership fees from \$0-\$15. The majority of the members are women between the ages of 20 and 60, who have experienced an illness or disability, and feel they were treated badly by the current Health Care System. Over the past few years, the Collective has managed to change what volunteering looks like. They no longer require all members to sit through decision-making processes, and now offer English as a second language. Membership and volunteering is now accessible and attractive to a much wider range of women.

The volunteers and members of the collective help women by counselling, advocating, and educating. Women are educated through information provided by the Collective and through seminars. Such programs are: Abortion Peer Support Group, Lesbian Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse, Abortion Counselling, and a Health Information Network. In these ways, the collective informs women, hoping to make them feel more

comfortable with their rights within the medical system--specifically rights surrounding issues of reproductive freedom. The Collective promotes health to keep women out of the system as much as possible, and draws connections for women between health and the environment. The Collective also attempts to present women with all possible options about any given subject, providing them with a broad range of knowledge. This knowledge empowers women by helping them make independent, educated decisions about their health care. They provide women with an in depth analysis of the health care system so that women will feel more confident with the decisions they do make.

The Collective has been a pioneer group in targeting their work towards disadvantaged groups. By providing alternatives to the mainstream health care services, the collective helps women of different ethnicities find health care they are comfortable with. They also pay special attention to preventative medicine, therefore helping women who are living in poverty that may not have enough funds to afford expensive prescriptions. In these ways, they are making an effort to help better all women's health.

The Health Collective also works as an advocacy and lobby group around the province. They actively speak out about the power imbalances in the existing medical system, and work to change these imbalances. They fight violence against women and expose the ways that the health care system perpetuates the violence in our society. They also challenge the distribution of funds in the system and advocate for more funding for the research of women's health issues.

The Vancouver Women's Health Collective must change with the times, as a new millennium is upon us. Members will no longer go into the office itself, but will access the information they need on the Internet. Hopefully, they will help women to help themselves, for the next two decades and beyond.