

Vancouver Women's Health Collective: A Herstory

The Vancouver Women's Health Collective (VWHC) has changed locales several times over the years, but one factor has remained constant: our aim is to empower women to take control of their own health care. Information Centre volunteers are often asked: What does the VWHC do? How did the VWHC get started? So here it is. . . .a herstory and an account of what we do, today!

The VWHC began in 1972, because a woman was angered with the health care provided by her general practitioner. The founding women recognized that women's health care was often ignored, under-represented and trivialized within the medical system. Originally, the collective worked as a meeting place for women to discuss their experiences and frustrations with the health care system. In 1972 the collective was established as a non-profit charitable women's organization.

What began as a small support system turned into a clinic where women could see a doctor and receive health care in a supportive environment. Women used the collective as a place to share their ideas and lobby to change the health care system for all women. Furthermore, as a collective, all women were participants in the decision making process of the organization.

Over the years, the VWHC has been active in a variety of ways. VWHC members, volunteers, and staff attended general practitioner conferences and the Provincial Women's Health Lobby in the fall of 1992. We held press conferences to promote awareness on diethylstilbestrol (DES), a synthetic estrogen used by women between 1941 and 1975 to reduce the risk of miscarriage. DES was later found to have serious health effects. Collective members raised awareness about the Dalkon Shield Action. Publications were written, some of which were translated into Mandarin and Spanish. Workshops were given on over fifty women's health issues including: DES, abortion, birth control, breast health, complementary therapies, infertility, menopause, menstruation, mental health, miscarriage, pap tests and sexually transmitted diseases, stress and unlearning racism.

Committees were formed to tackle different issues. An education committee organized a speakers' series open to women in the community. We have hosted "film nights" with viewings of movies related to women's health and experiences. To raise money for the collective, the committee organized an event to celebrate the VWHC's 25 years of women's health, supported women artists through art shows at the VWHC office, and sponsored social events at the Blarney Stone Pub and the sale of sunflowers on Fourth Avenue.

Today, the VWHC has two part-time staff members, one part-time project worker and many dedicated volunteers. We provide services to women through a variety of ways. At our volunteer-run Information Centre, women can access health information and resources through our files and library, which offer a range of health information from both a traditional and holistic perspective. In addition, women can view our Practitioner & Therapist Directory in order to get information about practitioners, both medical and non-medical, therapists and counsellors.

The Practitioner & Therapist Directory includes evaluations anonymously completed by women who have used the services of the practitioner. Women can also call during our Information Centre hours to receive assistance with their health search from a VWHC volunteer. While we prefer women to come into the centre, volunteers can research a requested health issue and mail out the information. Volunteers can also suggest other resources available at health agencies.

Another service the VWHC provides is the Community Health Advocate (CHA) project. This is an outreach project that educates women about their rights within the health care system. A goal of the Patient's Rights workshops is to provide a forum for women to ask questions and discuss their health care concerns. The CHA Coordinator and other workshop participants can share information and support each other so that women can become the experts and decision makers around their own health.

Our newsletter - HER VOICE - is published up to three times a year and is designed to keep women in touch with the activities of the VWHC as well as current health issues. We encourage women to submit articles to HER VOICE.

In June 2000, the VWHC moved to a new home. We are now located at 15th and Main in Vancouver. Since our move, we have seen the benefits of a more central location. More women are visiting the Information Centre than ever before!

While the initiatives undertaken by the Vancouver Women's Health Collective has changed over the years, our aim has remained the same since 1971...empowering women to take control of their health through information and self-advocacy.

Our Funders:

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