

## Conference Report

### Leaping into Health: Women Taking Action

The following is a report on the "Leaping into Health: Women Taking Action" conference organized by the Vancouver Women's Health Collective and sponsored by VanCity.

The Conference was held at the Native Education Centre in Vancouver on November 13th through 15th. The event consisted of a series of workshops concerning a variety of women's health issues. Demonstrations on various alternative healing techniques, such as Tia Chi, Massage and Yoga, Loktung, Reflexology, Shiatsu and Accupuncture, took place during workshop intermissions and during lunch breaks.

#### Workshops

##### Eating Disorders: When Food Isn't really the Issue

This workshop provided a basic overview of the eating disorders, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. Some of the areas discussed included: characteristics of eating disorders, who develops an eating disorder and why women seem to be more predisposed than men, contributing factors in the development and perpetuation of an eating disorder, physical and psychological consequences of an eating disorder, and treatment issues. This workshop was appropriate for anyone who wanted to know more about eating disorders or who was concerned about the impact of obsessive dieting and eating disorders on the girls and women in our society.

Facilitators Background: Cynthia Johnston (Med, Counselling Psychology; BSW) has worked in a variety of capacities in the field of women and health issues for a number of years. Much of her professional and academic work has focused around women's sexuality issues and eating disorders. She is the Coordinator of the Eating Disorder Resource Centre of British Columbia and she facilitates a support group for individuals struggling with eating disorders.

#### Breast Cancer

A panel discussion was held to address the physical, emotional, social and political ramifications of breast cancer.

The following facilitators presented

Dawn Black was born in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1943. A long time activist in her community and with the New Democrats in British Columbia, she was elected to the House of Commons in November 1988 as the Member of Parliament for New Westminster - Burnaby.

Dawn Black served as Executive Assistant to Pauline Jewitt, M.P., until Dr Jewett's retirement in 1988, and to John Cashore, M.L.A. for Maillardville - Coquitlam in British Columbia. Prior to this, Ms. Black chose a career as a sales representative, and raised a family, Married to Peter Black, Dawn has three sons, David, Matthew and Stuart. Ms. Black was a founding member of the Burnaby - based Public Education for Peace Society, an educational peace and disarmament resource group, and she serves on the Board of Directors for the Westminster Community Legal Services Society. Appointed New Democrat critic for the status of women in January 1989, Ms. Black has been the federal New Democrat spokesperson on reproductive choice, pay equity and violence against women, in addition to other topics of particular relevance to women. In September 1990, she assumed responsibility for all issues relating to child care. Through her successful Private Member's Bill, Dawn Black has had December 6 declared a "National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women." As well as being a member of the House of Commons Sub-Committee on the Status of Women, Dawn Black is on the Special Advisory Committee to the Speaker of the House and on the Panel of Chairmen of Legislative Committee. Ms.. Black serves as vice-chair of the federal New Democrat caucus and chair of the Social Policy Committee of the New Democrat caucus. She is also on the Strategic and Election Planning Committee, the Planning and Priorities Committee and the Policy Review Committee of the federal New Democrats. Dawn Black also belongs to the Association of Canadian Women Parliamentarians, Canadian Parliamentarians for Global Action and World Women Parliamentarians for Peace.

Judith Caldwell is the President of the Canadian Breast Cancer Foundation of B.C. Chapter which was established in April, 1992. The foundation is a not-for-profit organization with a mission to provide the financial base to support breast cancer awareness, education, research, treatment and advocacy. Judith is a breast cancer survivor.

Dr. Charmaine Kim-Sing, MB, ChB, FRCPC University of Capetown 1980. Is a radiation Oncologist at the British Columbia Cancer Agency with a special interest in Breast Cancer Research and Treatment.

Nancy Armitage is an employee with the Vancouver Women's Health Collective. A feminist and activist, she has worked in women's organizations for the past 5 years.

## Exploding the Myths of Aging

Putting myths aside, the personal testimony shows that the problems of older people, except for health and fear of crime, are comparable to those of younger people. The message that emerges here, therefore, is that the older public, like the young, have bought the negative images of old age. They apparently assume that life is really tough for most people over 65.

Generalizations about the elderly as an economically and socially deprived group can do the old a disservice, for they confront older people with a society who sees them merely as a problem and not as part of the solution to any of societies problems

Facilitators background: Jean M. Buzan, DIP. Ad, Ed., M.A., was, until her retirement in 1981, chairperson of Gerontology at Douglas College, where she initiated studies in the subject in 1973 and was responsible for designing, instructing and coordinating educational events for and about the older person and aging. She attended University for the first time at age 50 and has now passed the "magical" age of sixty-five at which we are supposed to become 'old'. She therefore feels that she speaks from both personal experience and academic learning on the subject of older people. During her years at U.B.C attaining her degree, she worked in the field with older people in various capacities and gained a great deal of practical experience. During her time with Douglas College she attended courses at well-known gerontological centres in the United States. She is now a freelance Consultant and Lecturer on Aging and is writing a book on the subject. In the past few years she has lectured and broadcast in the United States and Europe.

## Sexual Encounters and Relationships in the 90's: keeping safe form sexual coercion and sexually transmitted diseases.

What are our beliefs about intimacy and our expectations for sexual encounters. We tried to expand our boundaries to incorporate strategies and skills which enhance women's power in sexual encounters and relationships. This interactive workshop was appropriate for women of all sexual persuasions.

Facilitators background: Robin Barnett is a health promotion consultant who has been working with women's health issues for over ten years. She is the co-author of A Feminist Approach to Pap Tests. Since 1987 she has been interested in

issues about women and HIV/AIDS and worked with the women and AIDS project in 1990-1991. Robin also has taught a continuing education course How to Find a Doctor and Get More From Your Health Care. Currently she works with the Women's Health Centre, University Hospital, and the Vancouver Health Department Condomania campaign. She has recently produced a video for new patients at the Women's Health Centre to enhance communication skills and working health care teams at that Centre. The Condomania campaign is currently running for the month of November.

## Dr. Shopping

What strategies contribute to working partnerships with health care practitioners? Learn practical ways to go about finding and interviewing any health care practitioner from doctors to alternate healers and improve communication skills and advocacy techniques for handling hassles. To get tips on finding and understanding reliable medical and health information. This workshop attempted to be sensitive to participant needs and also included content such as second opinions, informed consent, medical records and what to expect from common exams and procedures of women's health.

Facilitator: Robin Barnet (see above for biography)

### Sexual Abuse - out of the closet of denial.

As sexual abuse is coming out of the closet of denial, we all need to become better informed. Whether we are adult survivors, involved in some way with survivors, or suspect a child or young person we know is currently being abused, we need to deal with our feelings and know how to approach this issue in our thoughts and actions. In this workshop we addressed the symptoms and effects of abuse in women and children, including lesbians and women of color, repression and denial, what remembering is like, feeling scared and feeling safe, about men and women as abusers, disclosures, and what we can all do to promote the healing process of our own and others. It was our aim to provide a safe atmosphere for frank discussions and questions. all participation will be voluntary.

Facilitators background : Robin Rennie was born almost 48 years ago in Vancouver. She found her own therapy so engrossing she decided to pursue it as a career. She has an MA in psychology, has had a private counselling practice for 11 years, primarily with women, most of whom have been sexually abused.

: Christine Waymark is  
52 years old and has been a therapist with children and

adults for 20 years. Sexual abuse has been a focus with both adults and children. She has an MEd in counselling Psychology and is an accredited Family Therapist and a registered Play Therapist. Robin and Christine are into their 12th year together and share children, grandchildren, and Dragonstone Councelling.

## Traditional Health Practices

This workshop combined issues of health from culturally diverse perspectives.

Facilitators background: Radhika Bhagat is a community health nurse with the Vancouver Health Department. She spent her childhood in Fiji and moved to Canada in the mid 1970's. Radhika attended U.B.C. and completed her nursing degree. Later she completed her masters in nursing at the University of Calgary. For several years Radhika has been involved in home care with the health department. Recently she has moved to preventative services with the south and east health units. Her work will primarily be with families of pre-school age children. Presently, Radhika is an active member of the South Asian Women's Action Network. As a woman Radhika recognizes that it is difficult to take care of ourselves when there are increasing demands on our time. The Individuals basic needs must be met in order to promote healthy living. It will never be a priority for woman to attend aerobics class if there is no food on the table.

Elaine Jay has been a Community Health Nurse with the Vancouver Health Department, North Unit, Prevention Program, since 1988. She has worked with a multicultural population serving pre and post - partum mothers, newborns, pre-schoolers, and school age children.

Doctor Zarina Mosaheb has acquired degrees of "Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery" from Lahore Pakistan. She also possesses "Master of Public Health" degree which she passed from San Diego State University, San Diego - California, United States. She has covered various short courses in Mauritius, London (England), United States and Canada. Zarina has international work experience and has dealt with multicultural and multilingual people. She can speak as many as nine languages. Before she moved to Canada with her family, she left a job at the Ministry of Health in Mauritius where she was in charge of Maternal, Child-Health and Family Planning Program.

## Midwifery and Post Partum

This workshop included a history of Midwifery in Canada. Information on the International Conference of Midwives being held in 1993. As well as a discussion on how midwifery works today and the vision for the future. Post partum depression and self-help groups were discussed. The recovery process from post partum depression and the special issues women face.

Facilitators background : Carol-Ann Letty was a volunteer worker at the North Shore Women's Centre from 1980 until 1984. She was a diaphragm fitter and abortion counsellor at the Women's Health Centre. In 1983 Carol-Ann began her apprenticeship as a midwife and in 1984 she began classes at the B.C. school of midwifery where she graduated in 1987. She gained her midwives license in the State of Washington. Presently Carol-Ann sits on the board of the Midwives Association of BC. Her goal is to work toward the legalization of Midwifery.

Annie Ceschi is a mother of two and has experienced post partum depression. Annie has worked with the Pacific Post Partum Support Society which was established in 1972 for three years as a Telephone Counsellor and Group Facilitator. Annie's background includes counselling.

### Menopause In the 90's.

This workshop was interactive with an opportunity to share experiences and information in dealing with menopause and mid-life issues. As well, it explored the "promise" of menopause and the enrichment of the second half of our lives. The philosophy is that given information and an opportunity to express and share concerns, women will make informed decisions about their health.

Facilitators background: Dianne Knight, Lois Williams and Pat Chadwick are experienced Community Health Nurses with the City of Vancouver Health Department. They are currently involved in running groups and workshops for women experiencing menopause and mid-life.

### Stress, Strategies and Visions for Change.

Stress is the most pervasive occupational health hazard in work today. This workshop examined stress as a logical outcome of the effect of adverse working conditions, the ways in which work is organized and workplace psycho-social factors. The session also examined whether you can claim workers compensation for work-related stress when it reaches the point where absence from the workplace is necessary. Participation will utilize small group work and discussion in developing practical workplace strategies that envision a

healthier and more humanistic workplace future. The workshop provided examples of situations where work related stress has been recognized by WCB and how to go about filing a WCB claim for work-related stress.

Facilitators background: Janice Hight is a lawyer presently employed as a Workers' Adviser with the Ministry of Labour and Consumer Services. She is the instructor of the worker's compensation courses offered through the Labour Studies Program of Capilano College. In the past, she has worked as Counsel to the present Chairman of the WCB and in private practice for a downtown law firm.

Lois Weninger is one of two Co-ordinators of the Women and Work Repetitive Strain Injury Project along with Lynn Bueckert. She has 20 years of experience in education, training, management and public relations. She joined women and work from the B.C. Government where she spent eight years in office management, staff training and recruitment. She has varied background as a workshop clinician, teacher and staff trainer. Her experience and expertise ranges from health and safety training to music teaching, performance and choral education.

Lynn Bueckert is a Co-ordinator of the Women and Work Repetitive Strain Injury Project along with Lois Weninger. She is a Master of Arts candidate in Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University. Her area of study is global restructuring and its impact on clerical workers in free trade zones in Jamaica. Lynn was a teacher's assistant in the Women Studies Dept. for 5 semesters and has given guest lectures at several colleges in the lower mainland.

## Herbs and PMS: Healing the Cycle

An wholistic approach was discussed using herbs to regain balance with problems such as PMS, Yeast and painful periods. An exploration of the ways of finding our own innate rhythm using the wealth of plants we find growing around us which have been used by women through the ages. Also a look at chanting, breathwork, meditation and visualization as part of an approach in which we take responsibility for our health and well-being.

Facilitators background: Amanda Howe is an herbalist trained at the School of Herbal Medicine in England. She uses herbs as powerful allies to help regain our bodies natural rhythm and balance as well as chanting, breathwork, meditation and visualization. Born in England, she lived for several years in Nepal. She now makes her home on Vancouver Island on the edge of Strathcona Park, where she practices and grows herbs. She draws on experiences gained in the East and West

showing ways of empowering and healing ourselves as women in our changing world.

## Sexuality and Disability

The new NFB film was presented "Towards Intimacy", followed by group and panel discussion

Facilitators background: Ann Daskal is a member of the AIDS and Disability Action Project of the B.C. Coalition of People with Disabilities. Her goals are to provide accessible HIV/AIDS education and workshop materials to disability communities and help bring together the "traditional" disability community with the HIV/AIDS community over common issues and concerns. She has a hidden disability and an interest in sexuality from the feminist and disability perspective.

Caroline Porter began working in advocacy for persons with disabilities in 1986. She has worked with the United Way (North Shore) being a founding member of the North Shore Advisory Committee on Disability Issues. She has also been a student employee at the District of North Vancouver in the Social Planning department. Currently she is studying Sociology and Women's Studies at Simon Fraser University and volunteers with the SFU Women's Centre as a collective member. In January she will begin work with the disabled Women's Network ( Dawn Vancouver's Network resource File.

Mary Williams is a high quad who has been virtually a non-stop political activist since her discharge, after eight years, from Pearson Centre. She is external vice-president of the B.C. Coalition of People with Disabilities and a board member of DAWN Canada. Her interests include disabled women's health issues and she was a participant in the sexuality program at Shaughnessy Hospital's Acute Spinal Cord Injury Unit. Mary lives independently with her cat and an attendant.

## Native Health

This workshop focused on the health problems of Native people in the downtown east side of Vancouver, discussing why Native people don't utilize health services and what some of the programs are that the Native Health society is working on to make health services more accessible to Native people.

Facilitators background: Marge George has lived in the Vancouver area for 30 years. She has worked with various Native organizations for the past 21 years. Presently, Marge works with the Vancouver Native Health Society. She has been



there for 13 months. Marge is a mother of 4 and grandmother of 4. Growing up, Marge was a foster child and attended residential school.

## The Political Context of Mothering

This workshop was an opportunity for mothers to share stories about the difficulties and struggles of mothering as well as the strengths. To discuss what visions we have for ourselves, our families and society. We linked individual experiences to the bigger issues of class, race, sex and sexuality, productivity and conformity. We explored how the oppression of mothers is fundamental to the oppression of all women.

Facilitators background: Joanne Arnott is a Metis mother, writer and activist. She is the author of an award winning book of poetry "Wiles of Girlhood". Joanne is a facilitator with the Alliance of Women Against Racism Etc (AWARE) She parents two dynamic young people.

Nancy McRitchie runs a home daycare, coordinates a parent education project and leads workshops for women in the co-counselling community. She is also part of the Wages for Housework Campaign. Nancy mothers/stepmothers four children ages two to twelve.

## Women of Color and Access to Health care

This workshop explored the factors that limit immigrant women's access to the health care system. How can this system be reframed to better meet the needs of women? How do cultural values and women's socialization inhibit them from being active participants in their health care? Facilitators and participants will share real situations and work together to develop strategies that support more meaningful exchanges between women of color and the health care system.

Facilitators background: Veena Mathur works with the Vancouver health Department. She started as a volunteer interpreter during the early 1970's. In 1975 the health department created the position of health aid interpreter. Veena applied and has remained in the position for the past eighteen years. Twenty-five years ago Veena immigrated from India and is aware of the challenges facing many immigrant women. Cultural values can promote and/or hinder a woman's health. It is vital to recognize the conflicts women face and provide them with support and access to information and services that promote healthy Living reflective of their unique needs.

Ranjit Dhari is a community health nurse with the Vancouver Health Department. She has worked there for the last six years. Her work centers on prevention and education. It is important for women to regain control of their own health. Often immigrant women are discouraged or prevented from being active in the decision making process around their own health, health alternatives and services. Language difficulties and cultural barriers reinforce the isolation and powerlessness that many immigrant women feel as they deal with a health system that fails to consider their special needs. Ranjit juggles her career with being a homemaker and mother to two children ages four and fifteen months.

### **Women's Health Lobby: Taking Action to Ensure our Health**

This was a dynamic and fun session which prioritized the issues identified during the workshops. From this was developed an ongoing Women's Health Lobby that strategizes about how to lobby the local and provincial governments and industries to ensure our health.

Facilitators background: Raine McKay is a paid worker at the Vancouver Women's Health Collective. Raine has been involved in grassroots and national women's lobby groups for the past 15 years.