



Network Properties ▾

 Search

- Topics
- People
- Personals
- My Planet
- Shopping
- Entertainment
- News
- Travel

- ◆ Search
- ◆ Opinion
- ◆ Queer History
- ◆ Coming Out
- ◆ Best of 2007

PlanetOut
News & Politics

Home > News

Our Bodies, Our Health

OPINION | Lesbian Notions

by Paula Martinac
August 02, 2002

With the alarming revelation that hormone replacement therapy (HRT) actually increases women's risk for heart disease, stroke and breast cancer, the country may finally be waking up to something lesbian and feminist health activists first talked about 30 years ago -- that menopause, like pregnancy, isn't a disease to be "treated."

The danger of HRT is as big a scandal as Enron or pedophile priests, representing a massive breach of public trust. Millions of women have taken synthetic estrogen to relieve the annoying indications of menopause, like hot flashes, loss of sex drive, mood swings and insomnia and also to guard against heart disease and osteoporosis. Doctors have even prescribed hormones to perimenopausal women (those in their 40s, just prior to menopause) to deal with pesky problems like irregular periods. Without a doubt, straight women have been the primary market for this therapy, which amounts to yet another sexist ploy

More Lesbian Notions:

- [Fan mail from Dr. Laura](#)
- [Intimate strangers: lesbians and gay men](#)
- [Can we talk?](#)
- [More ...](#)

Speak Out:

- [Discuss the news](#)

PROMOTION

Search News headlines

Search headlines by keyword(s):

Login Now

Member Name:

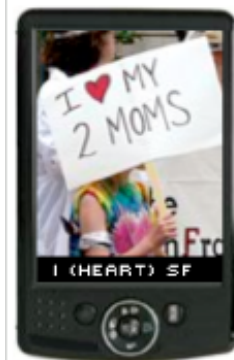
Password:

Save name and password

Log Me In!

[Forgot login/password?](#)

Not a member?
JOIN NOW! GO



You'll have so many stories to tell.

Find out what's new in SF.

(like Botox or cosmetic surgery) to convince women that they must halt the aging process. Now many of the women who used HRT face life-threatening health issues that could make feeling sweaty, cranky, tired and not in the mood look pretty good by comparison.

e.g. domestic partnership, Milwaukee, gay youth

Sort by:

Date, Newest First

Search

On the hopeful side, the HRT crisis may help bring the terrible era of overmedicating women to a well-deserved close. In just a few weeks, there's been an explosion of media focus on alternative ways to navigate the trying time that my mother's generation referred to --in hushed voices, of course -- as "The Change." And when Katie Couric starts weighing the merits of herbs like black cohosh and valerian for coping with menopause, a lot of women will be listening.

What's not being said in the media, though, is that much of the information about alternative therapies isn't new. During the heyday of the women's health movement in the late 1960s and early '70s, feminists critical of the male-dominated medical establishment began learning about their bodies and sharing this knowledge with other women through clinics, workshops and books like "Our Bodies, Ourselves." In particular, they sought out natural therapies and preventative medicines from Asian and Native American cultures.

Not surprisingly, a lot of the health-care activists who spearheaded this movement were lesbians. Among them was Joan Waitkevicz, an M.D. in New York who often had two choices of remedies to prescribe -- a conventional pharmaceutical one and an herbal one. If you chose the herbs, there was a well-stocked, lesbian-run apothecary shop in the neighborhood. Many of these lesbian health-care workers brought their valuable knowledge of self-help and natural remedies with them when they volunteered during the AIDS epidemic.

Although it's not what it once was, the feminist health movement is still going strong in some areas -- including cyberspace. The pioneering Feminist Women's Health Center in Washington state now has branch clinics as far away as New Hampshire and Georgia. Its Web site (www.fwhc.org) correctly addresses menopause as a wellness issue, not an illness.

There are out lesbian practitioners, too, like Kate O'Hanlan, a gynecological oncologist practicing in Northern California, who has co-written a valuable book called "[Natural Menopause](#)." At www.ohanlan.com, she suggests a variety of simple alternatives to hormones. She and other feminist health-care providers stress the need for women over 40 to get regular weight-bearing and aerobic exercise and to follow a diet that includes whole grains and soy in order to help manage menopause and avoid heart disease, osteoporosis and possibly even cancer.

In addition, the program of the upcoming (August 21-25) Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Health Summit in Boulder, Colorado, features several workshops on alternative medicines, including one for lesbians. Unfortunately, however, the summit doesn't specifically target the needs of perimenopausal and menopausal women, except in one workshop aimed at bisexual women and called "Loving Our Perimenopausal Pussies."

That may be because our community, just like mainstream America, often glosses over the health concerns of women over 40 -- until they become manifested in a disease like breast cancer. When was the last time, for example, that you read about women's bone health in the lesbian and gay press? The concerns of younger lesbians, like pregnancy issues and safer sex, make better copy -- that is, when they're dealt with at all. We've also virtually erased the enormous contributions lesbians made to

PlanetOut Direct
[News to You](#)
 Get PlanetOut
 News headlines
 mailed directly to
 you now!

managing our community's wellness. Nowadays it's more popular to diss '70s lesbians for going off the politically correct deep end than it is to praise their groundbreaking work in the area of self-help.

What the HRT crisis clearly demonstrates is that health care for middle-aged women is in a sorry state. Ideally, our community would use this information to set up workshops specifically for 40-plus lesbians, implementing the lessons of the feminist health movement. That, of course, means acknowledging that maybe all those granola- and tofu-loving lesbians weren't so crazy after all.

Paula Martinac is a Lambda Literary Award-winning author of seven books. She can be reached at PMcolumn@aol.com.

[Company Info](#) | [Advertise on PNO](#) | [Frequently Asked Questions](#)
[Privacy Policy](#) | [User Agreement](#) | [Community Guidelines](#)
[PNO Affiliate Program](#) | [Letter to the Editor](#)
© 1995-2009 PlanetOut Inc | [Legal Notice](#)