

FAT LIBERATION AND THE WOMEN'S HEALTH MOVEMENT

by

Judith Stein

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Moderator (Diane Denne): Next will be Judith Stein who is a lesbian/feminist who has been active in the women's health movement for the past six years. She was Co-Director of Women's Community Health Center, a feminist self-help health center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and currently sits on their Advisory Board. She co-founded the Boston Fat Lesbian Liberation Group, a consciousness-raising and support group, and organized the Fat Dykes Group at the 1979 Michigan Women's Music Festival. She co-organized the First Feminist Fat Activists Meeting which was held during this weekend in New Haven.

Judith: I worked in the self-help movement for a long time, and during that time I learned some things about the women's health movement. Some of this also applies to women who are feminists who work in straight health-care settings, but who, in some way -- either through their individual actions or whatever -- are trying to alter the traditional health care providers. So I was glad to see the number of women who work in health care [here at the Conference].

These are some of the things that I think are characteristics of the women's health movement. One is that we have learned to take information about medicine, about health, about the facts of our bodies from women, ourselves. And we have learned to distrust the doctors, the popular media, advertising, and learned to look for the profit motive in things like birth control, cures for vaginal odor, things like that. We've learned to respect women's experiences and to validate that.

We know we're not crazy when we have menstrual cramps. And we know we're not sick because we are pregnant. And we know that menopause is a normal function of aging. These are things that we've learned as women in the women's health movement. And we've learned them by being skeptical, by questioning the doctors and the authorities about what we've been taught as women; by questioning our socialization, and most of all by listening to each other and validating our experiences. We've gone back and looked at the sources to see where medical information comes from, and what the bias might be -- where information about vaginal odor and its relation to vaginitis comes from a company that produces and sells a vaginal deodorant spray. That's not uncommon.

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That high level of skepticism about what doctors tell us about our bodies, our health, our life, is, I think, the key hallmark of the women's health movement. It's what allowed us to work actively and develop support groups for each other on certain issues where we need them, to develop low-trauma abortion techniques for early pregnancy, to learn about herbal remedies for vaginitis, herbal remedies for menstrual cramps, to learn about our menstrual cycles so that we can control if and when we get pregnant without use of artificial devices. And that's because as women in the health-care movement, we have asked questions, and we distrusted what we had learned in the past.

Now, let's look at the women's health movement in its relation to fat liberation. I want to give you just a couple of examples of where that same skepticism, that questioning, and that absolute integrity of trusting women's experiences has fallen absolutely on its face, across the board, almost without exception, in a feminist health movement that is now almost 15 years old. I think that maybe, things are beginning to change.

I am going to speak about specific situations. I am not singling these groups out as particularly bad, or the most careless, or the far end of the extreme, rude and unsupportive behavior with which Fat Liberation has been consistently met within the feminist community -- because they are not. They simply are the ones that I know about and could remember in preparing this.

Healthright is a newsletter that serves the women's health movement which is based in New York City. Fat Liberator Publications is a press which distributes material about health, written from a Fat Liberation perspective. Healthright has lost manuscripts from Fat Liberator numerous times. After they lost it the first time, they requested it a second time, and then lost it again. There is a certain amount of carelessness that those of us in the women's health movement have experienced from state bureaucracies which we know is deliberate. I have serious questions about a certain level of carelessness that causes manuscripts dealing with fat liberation to be ignored, lost, disappeared or dealt with in absolute disbelief.

I have one other story about feminists in the health-care movement. A group of women I know were staying in a house in Washington D.C. last fall, during the National Gay and Lesbian March on Washington. That evening before the March there was a big discussion -- there were a lot of women staying at this house. The discussion began because a number of these women were fat women and fat liberationists who had met each other at the Fat Liberation meetings at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, and were having a sort of reunion. So naturally enough, the conversation turned to issues around fat, fat politics, and in an audience of feminists, among a group of feminists there for a political event, there was a discussion about fat oppression, and fat liberation.

Women went to bed, got up the next morning, and went to the march. Later they heard about a conversation. And the particular thing about this conversation was that is involved, among others, a Physician's Assistant who carried great credibility because she is a feminist and a health care provider. And this woman's comment was: "Perhaps we should lay the oppression on thick on fat women. Maybe we really need to oppress them, because then it will get so bad, they'll lose weight." I ask you to play this same remark in your mind, with a group of men talking about increasing their sexism in an attempt to subdue feminist activity.

I don't think this was an atypical attitude. There has been, from the women's health movement, and the individuals in it, from women's health centers and from feminist health providers, an absolute unwillingness to question the medical information about fat. Even feminists and political women who know that is it not cool to talk about fat being ugly, will still at their bottom line insist that it's not healthy -- and give examples of fat women they know who have health problems.

But that's a lie! It's the same lie that we were taught about birth control, about menstruation, about sexuality, about pregnancy, about vaginitis. It is lies from the same source, from the same people, for the same motives -- profit from and control over our lives.

So what do I want from the women's health movement? What do we want as a Fat Liberation Movement? What should all of you want for all of us, as women trying to control our own lives?

It's really very simple. What I want from women in the women's health movement, from women as health-care consumers, from women who are health providers, is to apply the same skepticism that we have learned to apply to what we have been taught about our lives as women in all these other areas, to apply that same skepticism to what we learn about nutrition, to what we learn about fat, to what we learn about the connection between eating and weight, which has got to be one of the grossest and most widely believed lies that's controlling our lives.

if we were to begin to apply that same skepticism; if as a whole movement we were to begin to apply that same respect for women's experiences to what fat women say our experiences have been; if we would begin to apply that same skepticism to medical texts, and read the research that has come from the Fat Liberation movement, then we could really begin to make some changes in the experience of every woman, fat or not, when she walks into a health care setting.

Concretely, what does this mean? In women's health centers, organize in-service training, education. For the New England area there are women in the Boston area who are willing to do this training for health care providers. There is a lot of literature, much of it includes factual information from documented sources, in which is contained truth about food, about fat, about diets, and about diet remedies. That's all available for the asking.

Women working in health care have to take it upon themselves to go back to their health-care setting and begin to kick ass. Because that's what it's going to take -- women who go back and say: "Just like we learned about all those other things, we learned a lot of lies about fat, about food, about weight, about diets. Those lies are oppressing women, and killing them. And we have to begin to change that."

Women who don't work in the health care field, who go to health centers, need to look around and confront the lies that come up in your individuals dealings or from the things that you see on the wall, or interactions in the waiting room that are oppressive to fat women, and to all women. Fat oppression is oppressive to every woman, because it keeps us in a panic about the size and shape of our bodies.

Until all of us begin to change that -- and I think the women's health movement is the absolutely logical first place to start -- because those women have a tradition and a practice of being skeptical. We have to get them to turn that around about fat, and to confront the truth -- that's something that every woman can do in health care settings.