

Lorraine Rothman, 75; feminist clinic's co-founder helped demystify gynecology

By Elaine Woo, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
October 3, 2007

Lorraine Rothman, a founder of the feminist self-help clinic movement who demystified basic gynecology for thousands of women at centers in Los Angeles and Orange counties, died of cancer Sept. 25 at her home in Fullerton. She was 75.

In 1971, Rothman, a teacher and mother of four, founded with Carol Downer the Los Angeles Feminist Women's Health Center, which taught women how to perform their own cervical self-examinations and pregnancy tests.



Lorraine Rothman

They also popularized a procedure called menstrual extraction, which could be used as a method of early abortion.

The two women's pioneering efforts helped unleash a cultural revolution that, according to writer and social critic Barbara Ehrenreich, "legitimized the notion that we have the right to know and to decide about procedures -- from sterilization to hormone treatments -- that affect our bodies and our lives."

"What they did by introducing gynecological self-exams was very revolutionary at the time," Ehrenreich said Tuesday. "They said it was not a dark secret; you can look at yourself, it's no big deal. It had a big effect on all of us feminists who were interested in healthcare."

Rothman's unique contribution was a patented menstrual extraction kit called the Del-Em, a device with a few simple parts, including flexible tubing and a syringe, that were used to aspirate the uterine lining into a glass jar.

She also was an early critic of hormone replacement therapy, which she challenged, often in a humorous way, in her book "Menopause Myths and Facts: What Every Woman Should Know About Hormone Replacement Therapy" (1999), co-written with Marcia Wexler.

Rothman was born in San Francisco in 1932 in an Orthodox Jewish family. She bristled at the unequal treatment of women in her religion and refused to undergo a bat mitzvah.

"She questioned authority from the time she was a little kid," said her daughter, Andrea.

When Rothman was 12, she moved with her family to Los Angeles, where her father established a furniture repair shop.

In 1954, she earned a bachelor's degree and a teaching credential at what is now Cal State L.A. For the next decade, she worked as a substitute teacher in Maryland and California while raising a family with her husband, Al, a biology instructor. He died in 1995. In 1968 Rothman entered the women's movement through a consciousness-raising group at Cal State Fullerton, where her husband was teaching. Soon she was a member of the Orange County chapter of the National Organization for Women. Through her widening network of similarly disenfranchised housewives and other women, she learned of a meeting in April 1971 about an event billed as a self-help clinic.

Downer, a housewife and mother of six who belonged to the Los Angeles chapter of NOW, had helped organize the meeting at a feminist bookstore in Venice. When it was her turn to speak, she perched herself on a table and, to the amazement of Rothman and the other two dozen or so women present, inserted a plastic speculum into her vagina.

Then she proceeded to give them an anatomy lesson they would never forget, using anatomically correct terminology -- shocking at a time when doctors and their patients commonly used euphemisms such as "down there" to describe women's sexual and reproductive systems.

Her demonstration changed the course of the meeting and made Rothman an ally. As Rothman recalled in "A Woman's Book of Choices" (1992) by Pace University professor Rebecca Chalker, "We talked about taking charge of our own healthcare." It was an exhilarating but also highly subversive concept because it challenged physicians' paternalistic control over women's reproductive lives.

At the same meeting, another woman brought out a thin plastic tube called a cannula and a plastic syringe without a needle that were being used to perform suction abortions at an underground clinic in Santa Monica. The clinic promoted its method as less traumatic than the dilation and curettage technique of using a metal tool to scrape the inside of the uterus.

Rothman thought the abortion clinic's device was clumsy and had a potentially fatal flaw: It lacked a mechanism to keep air from being accidentally pumped back into the uterus. She spent the next week redesigning the device with parts she found in supermarkets, hardware stores, aquarium shops and her husband's biology lab.

When she brought her version of it to the next clinic meeting, Downer was enthusiastic. It was relatively easy for women to use on one another, and it had a two-way bypass valve to prevent air from being injected into the uterus.

Because abortion was still illegal (Roe vs. Wade, the U.S. Supreme court case that legalized it, was not decided until 1973), menstrual extraction was not touted as a method for ending a pregnancy but for regulating menstrual flow. Nonetheless, the implications were not lost on

Downer and Rothman, who saw themselves as revolutionaries.

"The idea of women being able to control their own birthrate is fundamental. It goes right to the heart of women's political situation," Downer said this week. "We both wanted to turn the whole thing upside down. We wanted to make women equal with men."

Four months later Rothman and Downer were promoting the menstrual extraction device at a NOW conference in Santa Monica. The conference organizers were so appalled that they refused to give the women exhibit space, so Downer and Rothman set up shop in their hotel room, where women poured in to learn self-examination and menstrual extraction.

Barbara Seaman, a women's health activist and author, met Rothman around this time and recalled that she did not fit the stereotype of a feminist firebrand.

"She was married to a professor. She seemed like a very proper Jewish mama," Seaman said, but she and Downer were "tigers at the gates" of a medical establishment that had earned feminists' distrust.

Later that year, Rothman and Downer set off on a national tour, holding demonstrations for women's groups in 23 cities. They held a private demonstration for anthropologist Margaret Mead, who later said that she considered menstrual extraction one of the most original ideas of the 20th century.

"She said it was amazing, something that should have happened long ago," Seaman recalled.

In 1971, Rothman and Downer established the first Feminist Women's Health Center in Los Angeles, which was followed shortly after by a center in Santa Ana. Women inspired by Rothman and Downer opened clinics elsewhere across the country.

Over the next two decades, Rothman helped manage the Los Angeles and Santa Ana centers. After they closed in the mid-1980s, she continued to lecture and write about women's health issues.

In addition to daughter Andrea, Rothman is survived by another daughter, Theresa; sons Murray and Kenneth; and six grandchildren.

A funeral service will be held at noon Sunday at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Fullerton at Temple Beth Tikvah, 1600 N. Acacia Ave. Memorial donations may be sent to the church for the Lorraine Rothman Memorial Fund.

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