

Introduction

By Jane Pincus

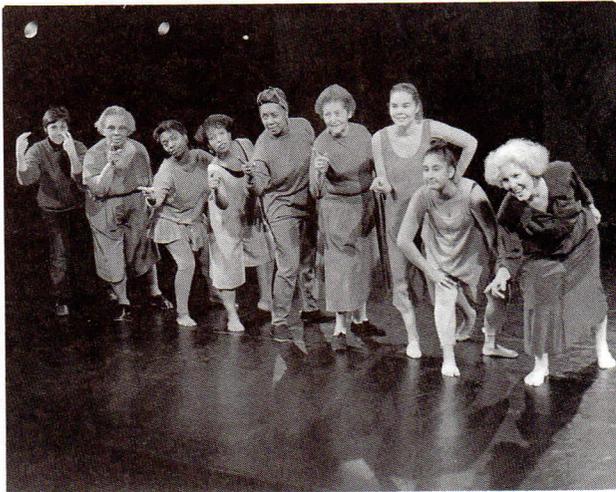
WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO Ruth Bell Alexander, Joan Ditzion, Vilunya Diskin, Paula Doress-Worters, Linda King, Elizabeth MacMahon-Hererra, Judy Luce, Judy Norsigian, Jamie Penney, Wendy C. Sanford, Norma Swenson, Sally Whelan, Jennifer Yanco, and Kiki Zeldes

Welcome to *Our Bodies, Ourselves for the New Century*! We offer first-time readers and old friends a greatly updated and expanded book that remains true to its beginnings. First published in 1970, the book grew out of a course by and for women about health, sexuality, and child-bearing. The original contributors began meeting weekly in Boston at the end of the dynamic 1960s, when women throughout the U.S. and the world were getting together to share experiences and expose the injustices in women's lives. In recounting our life stories and health care experiences, we discovered with surprise and elation that the "personal is political"—that we were not alone in what happened to us. By pooling all we knew about ourselves, we could create a useful body of knowledge. We soon realized that forces much larger than ourselves determined the availability and quality of health and medical care, and that by working in unison and sharing our knowledge and clout, we could become a force to alter the system to meet our needs. The resulting book became a road map for women and helped to launch and sustain the national and international women's health movement, selling more than

four million copies in many languages throughout the world.

Unlike most health books on the market, *Our Bodies, Ourselves for the New Century* is unique in many respects: It is based on, and has grown out of, hundreds of women's experiences. It questions the medicalization of women's bodies and lives, and highlights holistic knowledge along with conventional biomedical information. It places women's experiences within the social, political, and economic forces that determine all of our lives, thus going beyond individualistic, narrow, "self-care" and self-help approaches, and views health in the context of the sexist, racist, and financial pressures that affect far too many girls, women, and families adversely. It condemns medical corporate misbehavior driven by "bottom-line" management philosophy and the profit motive. Most of all, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* encourages you to value and share your own insights and experiences, and to use its information to question the assumptions underlying the care we all receive so that we can deal effectively with the medical system and organize for better care.

This newest *Our Bodies, Ourselves* has been thor-



Members of the Intergenerational Troop, Back Porch Dance Company/Eric Levinson

oughly revised, and every chapter contains new and updated information. We have listed and critiqued online health resources for women. The chapters “Body Image” and “Sexuality” deal for the first time with issues of racism. We emphasize overwork, violence, and girls’ increasing use of tobacco as major threats to women’s health, and we highlight more than ever the importance of good food and exercise. We explore the new issues that arise as more lesbians choose to have children. We include transgender and transsexual issues, and discuss women living with HIV as well as the most recent safer sex advice. We explore more extensively the connections between race, class, and gender-based oppressions as they affect the health of women. We offer tools for negotiating the complex and often unregulated “managed care” system, which affects women’s lives much more profoundly than men’s, and discuss its advantages and disadvantages. Most important, we advocate for an equitable, single-payer national health care system.

Over these past three decades, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* has grown in scope and depth. From the start, the original authors have involved more and more women in its creation, adding new perspectives to each edition, expanding the “we” that appears so frequently throughout the book. This expansion has been a vital process, as the many contributing communities—lesbians, women of color, women with disabilities, older and younger women, to mention several—have changed in self-definition and focus.

While it is exciting that this book stays alive, growing and changing, the process of becoming more inclusive has been difficult and painful at times. For example, like many groups initially formed by white women, we have struggled against society’s, and our own, internalized presumption that middle-class white women are representative of all women and thus have the right to define women’s health issues and set priorities. This assumption does a great injustice by ignoring and silencing the voices of women of color,

depriving us all of hard-won wisdom and crucial, life-saving information. This time around, many more women of color have been involved in creating this book, writing some of the chapters, and editing and critically reading every chapter. During this process, tensions sometimes arose about what to include or leave out and how to frame certain issues. The resulting vigorous discussions have greatly enriched the book’s content. But as in any organic process, some conflicts still remain to be resolved.

Those of us who worked on the original edition are now in our 50s or older. Some of us have made the politics of women’s health our lives’ work. To continue the book’s long history and to ensure that it remains up-to-date, hundreds of women—including “ordinary” women, community organizers, social scientists, student interns, friends, health activists, and medical professionals—have contributed to this edition. Many women who were not yet born when the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was published—including some daughters of Health Book Collective members—have shaped the book significantly with their voices and experiences. More than ever before, the staff of the Women’s Health Information Center has anchored our research efforts, responding to readers, gathering and documenting health information, participating in national and international women’s health endeavors, and strengthening the women’s and documentation center movements.

Despite the achievements of the larger women’s health movement, it is clear that the same forces that created the need for *Our Bodies, Ourselves* twenty-nine years ago exist today. Disparities in health continue to grow. Determinants of poor health, such as poverty, homelessness, and hunger have worsened, disproportionately affecting communities of color, non-English-speaking women, and women with low incomes in this country and throughout the world. The medical system remains a vast business more tightly connected than ever to drug and medical supply corporations, and increasingly controlled by larger national and international profit-making industries. As “consumers” we must still fight for control and accountability in health plans. Industries continue to pollute water, land, and air. Our increasingly conservative national government embraces the wishes and demands of business interests while seriously reducing or eliminating crucial federal funds for programs dedicated to maintaining and improving our health and lives. Welfare “reform” is causing even more anguish for immigrants and mothers with low incomes.

Thus, as the millennium approaches, our original goals for this book remain as important to us as ever: to fit as much information about women’s health between the covers of this book as we can, providing women with tools to enable all of us to take charge of our health and lives; to support women and men who work for progressive change; and to work to create a just society in which good health is not a luxury or a privilege but a human right.

One of the most valuable things we did in our early

While the information contained in *Our Bodies, Ourselves* will hopefully empower you and give you useful tools and ideas, this book is not intended to replace professional health and medical care.

years together was to talk in small groups about our lives. In doing so, we were reclaiming an important part of our common heritage as women who have always, in traditional communities, achieved wisdom by exchanging experiences with one another. We encourage you to meet together, to speak out and listen to one another, and to learn from one another. We recognize that in these times, more women must work harder than ever before and have very little time left over, even for our families. See what you can do close to home, in your living rooms, in your communities. Seek each other out at church, synagogue, or mosque; at the YWCA; at a nearby women's center; and at informal gatherings. Find ways to support the work of non-profit groups whose efforts you value. Talk together and organize around crucial issues. Fighting back can be good for you and can feel good, too!

We gain political strength by identifying what we have in common, respecting the special needs of each group, and standing in unity. Despite everyone's efforts, this unity remains fragile. We are still evolving ways to form communities that will stand in solidarity

with one another. Too often, differences in race, class, ethnicity, financial circumstance, sexual orientation, values, strategies, and degrees of power make it difficult to listen to one another, and these differences divide us. By telling the truth about our lives, women with dissimilar backgrounds and experiences make it more possible for every woman's voice to be heard and for every woman's life to be nurtured. To transform the world into a healthy place we need the energy of *all* women.

The Boston Women's Health Book Collective is a nonprofit organization devoted to education about women and health. Our many projects and services include a Women's Health Information Center; extensive distribution of free materials to women and organizations in the United States and other countries; several midwifery and reproductive health projects; assistance for women in other countries to develop their own translation/adaptions of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*; and a speakers bureau. Royalties income from the sale of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* is not sufficient to support our work. Therefore, the Collective continually needs additional funding from contributions and grants. Tax-deductible donations (made payable to BWHBC) are welcome. Send to Box 192, West Somerville, MA 02144. Thank you.



Founders of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective 1996/Judith Lennett