

Healthcaring: from our end of the speculum Good vibes vs. preventive medicine

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I am a woman, a nurse, and a mother, so I've experienced the inadequacies, inequities, and indecencies of the U.S. health care delivery system from several angles. And I certainly would not deny that a white male dominated medical profession maintains its privileged position partly by trying to keep people ignorant, mystifying them with incomprehensible language and other professional trappings. But I also have learned that the roots of this privilege lie in an economic system where the many produce the wealth and the few appropriate it and use it, and the criteria for its use is how much more wealth it will produce for those few. So, when it comes to the question of how money should be used to improve and restore the health and safety of most of us — men and women — our priorities are different from those who hold the purse strings.

This may seem pretty elementary to some people, and certainly those of us who were in the Movement in the 60s and early 70s, and participated in the setting up of free clinics to meet the needs of whatever particular group of oppressed people we were working with, learned a lot about the limitations of alternative institutions. But the struggle for free clinics and the "Women and Their Bodies" literature which came out of the Women's Movement had some positive effect on raising the consciousness of people (some of whom became health care workers) as to how they were being short-changed by the system and what they ought to be getting and demanding.

However, what was fresh and progressive in the 60s and early 70s can look simplistic and politically backward now. The politics of the film *HEALTHCARING: FROM OUR END OF THE SPECULUM*, produced by New York's Women Make Movies and directed by Denise Bostrom and Jane Warrenbrand, harks back to that earlier period, but to the worst aspects of that politics — narrow feminism and the alternative lifestyle. The main theme of the film is that only women can understand women and the workings of their reproductive system — thus women have to get together to learn how to take care of themselves. It is the politics of "self health" at its narrowest; not preventive medicine, but good vibes.

The film begins with individual women telling about how they were messed over by male doctors who didn't understand and didn't care to understand their female medical problems. Then there are a series of pictures and drawings from medical histories showing how women once had their children naturally, with the help of other women like midwives; then medical science and male doctors came into the picture and women's suffering in childbirth began. The example used is the development of the forceps — expressly designed for the convenience of the doctor and as an instrument of

torture for women and their offspring. In fact, the forceps was invented to deal with the problem of breach deliveries where survival of the fetus is closely related to getting it out of the birth canal. The forceps undoubtedly has saved the lives of many babies. That it has been misused for the doctor's convenience to speed up deliveries, and to free delivery rooms for the hospital administration, has to do with the system which places profitability above human needs. To imply that women were better off without medical science and technology is a celebration of backwardness and an insult to the millions of women and children who died and die in childbirth because of lack of medical care.

Although the film celebrates the "getting together" of women to control their lives, there are few visible signs of this, very few scenes where women are actually in the process of participating together in social change. There is a lot of emphasis put on the "knowledge of your body" aspect of self-health in the film, but most of it is discussion of teaching people, rather than shots of actual classes. The most relevant scene, and the best in the film, is in Chinatown in New York where you see women, old and young, stopping at a community health exhibit to hear short lectures on how to brush your teeth properly, with the aid of a clay model of teeth, and they also see different birth control devices demonstrated on a model of a pelvis.

Most of the film does not get into the Community. In fact, a lot of it is in someone's living room. There is a lot of footage in the living room of a mother and daughter who work as a team teaching self-health classes — I missed exactly where this was done or to what kinds of women. That did not seem very important. They smiled a lot at one another, and it was implicit and explicit that there ought not to be a generation gap among women — a woman is a woman is a woman. The high point of this lauding of self health is when the mother produces a speculum and proceeds to demonstrate the ultimate in liberation — self-insertion of the speculum while sitting in your living room chatting with your daughter. Voila — nothing to it. Cool, casual, self-satisfied. What do you see at the other end of the speculum, which is why you put it in to begin with? That is never dealt with. The point seems to have been the insertion itself. There was a bizarre smugness and self-indulgence about the whole scene — and an isolation from the reality pointed out by the Chinatown scene, albeit unwittingly.

The final example of self-health is a visit to a women's health clinic in Connecticut begun and operated by a women's collective. Very little is seen of the clinic in operation. Again, most of the time we are being told about the clinic by one of the women founders in a living room during a meeting of the collective. There is not much about the details of running such a clinic, the struggles, its strengths and limitations. Mainly we are left with the feeling that everybody feels good about it, that the women who are participating in the collective feel good about themselves and each other, and that the women doctors they hired appeared when they were needed, and good vibes were felt immediately because they cared.

The final scene in the film is fitting, underscoring the social isolation of the film. There is a "demonstration — that is, a staging of a demonstration. A group of women, some middle-aged, a couple of senior citizens, youngsters, a black, a brown, appropriately placed, carrying placards about getting together for better health care. The group is

standing in front of a building which says Yale School of Nursing on it, but there is certainly no indication that the "demonstration" is in any way related to it. There are no people watching this demonstration — except us in the audience. All the women are singing joyously about "Getting Together", but the overall feeling is the same as the Pepsi Generation ad on TV.

If the reader detects a tone of impatience with the politics of this film, he/she is correct. We are living in the midst of a health crisis in this country. Money for public health care facilities is being denied, and the cost of private medical care is soaring out of the reach of all but the most privileged and wealthy in this country. Public hospitals and clinics are being closed and cut back at a time when, because of inflation and rising unemployment, more and more people need them. What people need to know are the facts behind this and the possibility of getting together and fighting to keep, expand and improve the public health institutions they already have, and demand that more of the wealth that they produce be used for their well-being. Films that ignore the social and economic realities of the world in which they are made and that create illusions about that world are irresponsible and reactionary.

Women Make Movies, 257 West 19th Street, New York, NY, 10011 (212-929-6477),
produced and now distributes HEALTHCARING: FROM OUR END OF THE
SPECULUM.