

Book review

REACHING FOR HEALTH: THE AUSTRALIAN WOMEN'S HEALTH MOVEMENT AND PUBLIC POLICY

Gwendolyn Gray Jamieson.

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Emerging alongside the second-wave feminist movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Australian women's health movement has had a major influence on health policy and practice. This was achieved not just through prolonged engagement in political advocacy, but through the establishment of community-level services for women that integrated medical care with a commitment to improving the status and social wellbeing of women.

Gwendolyn Gray Jamieson provides an extensive history of the Australian women's health movement, beginning with the radical early years of the 1970s and carrying through to analysis of the Gillard–Rudd Government's response to women's health issues.

As Gray Jamieson points out, healthcare has long been a concern of the feminist movement. Advocacy for women's health services, reproductive rights and access to contraception were part of the women's liberation agenda in the early 20th century. But second-wave feminism introduced a more radical edge to this agenda. Access to quality healthcare became seen in the context of broader power structures that marginalised women and trivialised their experiences in mainstream institutions.

In the early 1970s, there was no money and very limited political support for healthcare dedicated to women and feminist activists had little experience with the healthcare system or with health-based advocacy. But these women were motivated by two core aims: to restructure power relations that placed women in a vulnerable, subordinate position (in health systems and more broadly in society) and to support women who were seeking more compassionate, appropriate and non-judgemental healthcare.

From a social movement perspective, what was unique about these aims was that they directed the movement not just towards political activism and advocacy, but towards direct service delivery. Women across Australia set about establishing a network of health and welfare services for women.

In a feminist framework, a social view of health and healthcare became integral to the movement's philosophy and action – healthcare was not simply an absence of illness, but the capacity to participate fully and equally in society, to be safe and to have the capacity to maintain good health. This meant that services not traditionally brought under the health banner, such as family violence centres, refuges and rape crisis services, became a focus of the women's health movement, and services tended to integrate medical care with a broader social agenda.

Gray Jamieson's account of this history more than does justice to the extensive and diverse achievements of the women's health movement. This is most impressive in her intricate documentation of the establishment of women's health and welfare services across the country, including community health centres, reproductive health services, abortion clinics, family violence

services, rape crisis centres and Aboriginal women's services. Gray Jamieson includes details of both formal records and anecdotes from the services' first meetings through to their struggles to attract seed funding and beyond to their expansion into broader service delivery. She also documents the organisations that did not get off the ground for lack of support or funds. These stories have been collated via a range of sources: previous written histories, newspaper clippings, organisations' newsletters, activists' writing, and the author's own experience as a founding member of the ACT Women's Health Network in the early 1990s (whose early 'financial management system consisted of collecting money in a polystyrene cup to cover meeting expenses', p. 141).

What makes this collection special is that many of these stories would likely be lost to history if it had not been pulled together in a text such as this. For example, Gray Jamieson recounts the story of the establishment of small, sometimes remote, services such as the Edith Edwards Women's Centre in Bourke, NSW, in the late 1980s, as 'illustrative of the extraordinary efforts women undertook to set up basic services' (p. 115).

Alongside this, Gray Jamieson presents an analysis of the political landscape in which the women's health movement operated – from the more progressive political climate of the 1970s through to John Howard's conservatism in the mid-1990s. What is clear from this analysis is that the women's health movement successfully created a political momentum that has been hard to ignore, even by highly conservative governments. Over time, all states and territories adopted women's health policies and strategies, moves that Gray Jamieson documents for each jurisdiction. She also recounts the development of the National Women's Health Policy in the 1980s, and expresses continuing frustrations with the limitations of the 2010 incarnation of the policy.

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions of the women's health movement is the ways in which it fundamentally challenged – and arguably altered – the landscape of the Australian medical system. The women's health agenda was not an easy sell, as Gray Jamieson puts it, 'Consider the circumstances: groups of feminists, easily dismissed as part of the lunatic fringe, spoke about taboo subjects in public and circulated a radical critique of an esteemed institution – namely the medical care system' (p. 215). Feminists criticised the medical system for allowing too much power to medical professionals over patients (often by limiting women's information about topics such as contraception or abortion) and for the over-medicalisation of women's bodies. Not surprisingly, there was much resistance to the movement from within the medical establishment. Despite this, the women's health movement has played an important role in the growing

legitimacy of a social model of health and community-based healthcare.

This volume is a detailed and rich account of the history of women's health services and health policy in Australia that will be of interest to students of Australian history and public policy in healthcare. It also makes a welcome addition to the political history of health, social movements, and feminism, both in Australia and internationally. But also, this book is likely to be

important to the thousands of women who have been involved in the women's movement in Australia. This story is personal for many women, and there are undoubtedly names, faces and stories that will be familiar to a great many people in this country.

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