



Community Health Care

A Strategy for Bringing Women Together

By Catherine Oliver

Le centre de soins communautaires peut se révéler une façon de rejoindre les femmes pauvres et de les réunir afin de traiter les causes de leur pauvreté. L'article décrit une visite type au centre de soins et certaines des caractéristiques organisationnelles qui facilitent ce processus.

“Davenport-Perth Community Health Centre.

Is this where I can see a doctor? My daughter is sick.

Yes, we have doctors and nurse practitioners here. Would you like to make an appointment?

Many times each day at the health centre the phone rings and the receptionist answers to initiate a conversation like this one. Let's follow Moira, a single mom with two children, as she visits the centre for the first time.*

Moira enters the health centre, a clean, bright, welcoming space, pushing a stroller and leading her three year-old daughter by the hand. She is attracted by the noise of children playing and wonders what that has to do with visiting the doctor. The receptionist greets the family, takes information, and shows Moira the toys and colouring materials for her children. Moira wonders how long she'll have to wait and is surprised to hear her daughter's name called quite soon.

Hello, my name is Susan. I'm a nurse practitioner, and I'll be seeing your daughter today.

Moira hurries into the room with the two children. She states her problem rapidly.

She's sick. Last night she had a fever, and she's had a lot of ear infections.

Moira is surprised at Susan's relaxed attitude as Susan spends time reviewing past health and carries out a complete examination. Susan explains

All our new patients get a complete exam on their first visit.

Susan asks Moira about where they are living.

We moved in there just last week. It's awful. There are roaches everywhere—but it's all I can afford. I'm not working. I'm on mother's allowance. I'd like to get a job, but... What are you asking me all these questions for anyway?

This is Moira's first encounter with a different kind of health care. Moira expects to spend quite a lot of time waiting to see the doctor and then having a very short visit ending with a prescription. She is surprised to find that waiting time is kept as short as possible. Moira is even more surprised by the length of the visit, with the nurse and the questions the nurse asks, which go beyond the usual medical focus.

I'm asking these questions because I know that housing,

employment, income, and lots of other things affect your health and your children's health. Here at the health centre, we believe that there is more to promoting good health than prescribing drugs and referring you to medical specialists, though we certainly do both of those things when necessary.

At the community health centre, Moira gets a prescription for her daughter's ear infection—which is what she came for—but she also finds out about those voices of children playing she heard on the way. Susan introduces Moira and her children to the parent/child drop-in down the hall. There, Moira will meet other moms and caregivers in the neighbourhood, and her children will make friends. A food buying club has just been started by the community organizer for health promotion, and Moira might join that. Susan and the health counsellor have organized a group of people who want to work on quitting smoking. The focus shifts from treating the ear infection (although this will always be important) to involving Moira with other women working on the causes of their ill-health.

Certain characteristics of community health centres, such as community boards and staff on salaries, account for some of the things that Moira found unique in this experience of medical care. At Davenport-Perth, at least one community member sits on each hiring committee. The hiring committee asks candidates questions to determine that they are aware of the wider causes of ill-health, beyond the strictly medical model, and that the candidates will be able and willing to work in a team with other health practitioners and staff of the neighbourhood centre.

Physicians and nurse practitioners at the health centre are paid by salary, rather than fee-for-service, as physicians are paid in private practice. This way, the health practitioners are able to take the time necessary to get to know their patients in some detail, to do the necessary counselling, and link them to other programmes in the centre.

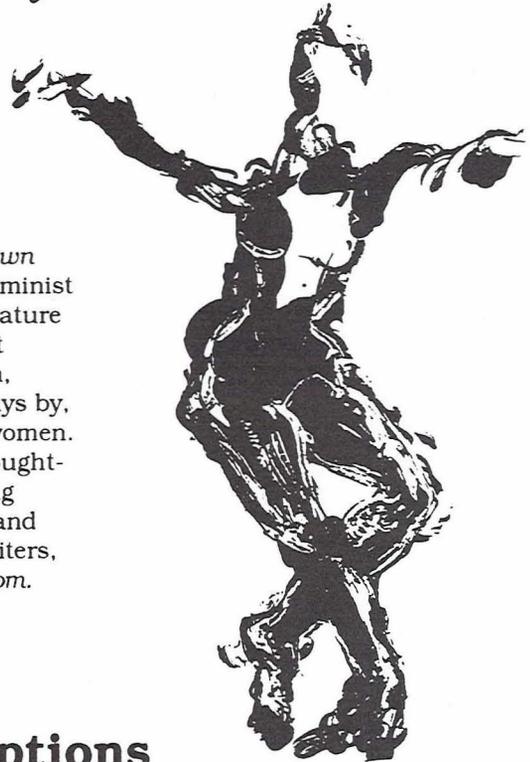
Moira will come back, and as soon as she becomes involved in the activities of the centre, she will link up with other women working with the staff of the centre. The challenge is to develop these linkages into effective attacks on the causes of ill-health.

* The views published in this article are those of the author and not those of the Davenport-Perth Community Health Centre. The encounter described in the article has been fictionalized and the names have been changed to protect individuals' privacy.

Catherine Oliver is a family physician practising at the Davenport-Perth Community Health Centre in Toronto. She graduated M.D. from McGill University

in 1973 and interned in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She has worked as a CUSO volunteer teaching medical assistants in Tanzania and as a family physician in Wawa, Ontario, Moose Factory, Ontario, and more recently in private practice and two community health centres in Toronto. She is a member of the Interim Regulatory Council on Midwifery in Ontario, and of the College of Family Physicians and the Medical Reform Group.

Room of One's Own



Room of One's Own is a Canadian feminist quarterly of literature and reviews that publishes fiction, poetry, and essays by, for, and about women. For exciting, thought-provoking writing from Canadian and international writers, subscribe to Room.

Subscriptions

__ One year \$15 __ Two years \$25 __ Institutions \$20

*In Canada, please add 7% GST to these prices.
Outside Canada, please add \$5 per year for postage.*

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY/PROVINCE _____

POSTAL CODE _____

Room of One's Own, P.O. Box 46160, Station G
Vancouver, B.C. V6R 4G5 CANADA GST #R1 19292423