

New book examines how ordinary women revolutionized health care in America

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As 40th anniversary celebrations get underway surrounding the book, 'Our Bodies Ourselves,' a new history examines the battles of ordinary women in demanding equality, choice and respect in medical treatment and education about their own bodies.

University of Cincinnati researcher Wendy Kline, an associate professor of history, uncovers their struggles and their empowerment in her new book, 'Bodies of Knowledge - Sexuality, Reproduction, and Women's [Health](#) in the Second Wave,' published by The University of Chicago Press.

Described as "one of the most compelling accounts of the history of women's health and feminist activism," Kline's book begins by tracing the impact of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective that organized in 1970, leading to the publishing of 'Our Bodies Ourselves' in 1973 - a book that has never gone out of print and is now translated into numerous languages. It was a movement that was credited with driving social change around the world, as it generated the first open conversations about women's health and sexuality.

Kline was one of the first researchers to gain access to the archives of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, which is housed at the Schlesinger Library at Harvard University. Kline says the papers include thousands of letters from ordinary women - perhaps the only accounts they had ever written or spoken of - regarding the hurdles they encountered in gaining access to knowledge about their own

reproductive systems - a taboo topic in a more conservative era dominated by male doctors.

"These were women writing from their kitchen tables, who left no other written record but these pages of how the treatment they endured had left them so angry and in some cases, this anguish led to the end of their marriages," Kline says. "Some of the most revolutionary events were not related to the abortion debate, but instead surrounded general health issues and how poorly these women felt they were treated by their doctors.

"It wasn't just a feminist issue, but it was the idea that your own knowledge about your own body was legitimate. It wasn't privileged 'doctor knowledge' - but rather the argument that everyone has the right to information about their body, and I argue that this really came out of the women's health movement," says Kline.

The book explores four themes regarding treatment and education that emerged from the movement

- The controversy surrounding medical school instruction of pelvic exams in the 1970s
- The abortion debate and women's health
- The racial controversy surrounding the promotions of Depo-Provera as a contraceptive and the impact of the Public Board of Inquiry investigation into its safety
- Midwifery, Lamaze and choices in childbirth

Kline says the book not only examines the progress that was made as a

result of the women's health movement, but also touches on the following generations of women that emerged as the daughters of feminism, and the issues they face today.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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