

## **HOBART WOMEN'S HEALTH CENTRE**

### **21<sup>ST</sup> BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS**

**10<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER 2008**

In Tasmania, lobbying for a Women's Health Centre started as early as 1974 and mirrored similar activity on the mainland and internationally. Some of you can cast your minds back to those days. They were the heady days of women's liberation, resurgent feminism, lobbying for women's rights; and social justice was on the agenda: it was an exciting time of great social change.

For me what shines through from the account of those years is the passion and strength of the people involved, many of whom were activists on a number of fronts. There was a sense of shared purpose and sisterhood. This activism led to many changes including the establishment of feminist, community women's health centres throughout Australia, but it was not until the 80's that Hobart Women's Health Centre was born.

In 1987, Tasmanians were given a small grant to organise a Women's Health Forum information from which was incorporated into the National Women's Health Policy.

This initial small grant was followed by 18 months' funding to do research on cardiovascular issues for women. This funding was enough to employ a researcher, Anne Collins, and three health workers: Lee Barker, Ree Van Galen and Jane Dunsford.

These workers ran groups for women on a wide range of cardiovascular themes such as stress management, self esteem, nutrition and exercise, all themes we continue to work on today. They also continued to lobby for funding.

Their hard work was rewarded – the end of the 18 months coincided with the election of a State Labor government, which began annual funding to the Centre. Two women politicians, Fran Bladel and Judy Jackson, were instrumental in obtaining the funding and were strong supporters of women's services. I feel Lisa Singh will prove to be an admirable successor. The funding apparently caused quite a stir at the time, even

nationally, as the concept of women without medical qualifications establishing a health centre was quite radical. Today we are funded by the State Government as part of a Federal/State agreement.

Something that typifies the early years for me, and is a wonderful example of the sisterhood I referred to earlier, is that the initial workers were trained by women from Liverpool Women's Health Centre in Sydney. These Sydney women raised cash at women's dances in Sydney to pay to come to Tasmania to train Tasmanian workers!

We also had assistance in establishing the Centre from Betty Pybus, campaigner for women's rights and women's health, who was later on our board for a number of years and an advocate for older women. We now have an annual lecture in her name.

Initially the Centre operated from the Women's Health Foundation building in Moonah, until 1991 when it moved to the building many people remember, Weroona in Elizabeth Street. It remained there until November 2002 when we moved here. At this point I must thank the wonderful women who had the foresight to purchase this building, notably then Coordinator, Megan Johns, worker, Maree Ransley and the Board of the time.

When I commenced work here, the Centre had only been in this building for about 4 months and I hadn't had a chance to visit. It was lovely to walk up the drive on my first day and find what a warm, welcoming, lively place the Centre was.

My first impression has only been enhanced. One of the most frequent comments from visitors is about the warmth of the atmosphere here. This refers both to the building and to the reception people are given.

I make this point because I think it is indicative of what a Women's Health Centre is all about. To be a warm and welcoming place where women can come and receive the information and support they need to take an active part in their own health to maximise their health outcomes.

The approach of the HWHC is different. We work from a holistic viewpoint and acknowledge the impact of societal influences such as income, education, gender, sexual orientation and isolation, on health outcomes for the individual.

Our services include a female GP, natural therapists, groups and consumer advocacy. We work on a number of levels: with the individual, with groups, in partnership with other service providers and also seek to influence policy and promote innovative health care. We have a great newsletter and a wonderful website which for many people is their first point of contact with us.

It is impossible for me to list all the wonderful initiatives and projects the Centre has been involved in over the years, so I shall offer a selection which hopefully will give you the flavour of our work. I also invite you to look at the photographic displays which highlight our work.

In 1993, the Centre was instrumental in the formation of the Clinical Teaching Associates program to train medical students to perform PAP smears involving women trained to provide relevant feedback. The program was run by the Centre for 13 years, until 2006 and continues, run by UTas and Cancer Screening. Before the CTA program, medical students were trained to perform PAP smears on cadavers or on anaesthetised women, not necessarily with their consent. Remember, we are talking 1993!

Over the years, the HWHC has run many programs on nutrition and on Body Image – notably the ‘This Is Me’ project of 2000 which promoted a positive body image, particularly to young women, and developed such memorable slogans as “Marilyn Monroe wore a size 16” or “Look at the Person in the Mirror as a Friend, not a Challenge”.

We provide the Encore program in Hobart and Launceston. This is a program of gentle exercises for women recovering from breast cancer surgery and is sponsored by Avon through YWCA. A Breast Cancer Support group has arisen from Encore, which we run with the Breast Cancer nurses.

We also host support groups for Endometriosis, and Lymphedema sufferers and run a social group for same-sex attracted women, and one for older women and a writer's group.

Since 1999 we have had a number of research projects into the health of migrant and refugee women in Tasmania, the most recent of which is the Migrant & Refugee Women's Health Project, undertaken in 2007.

Other milestones for the Centre include the establishment and editing of a feminist services magazine, 51%, in the late 90's; and the formation of IWOT, the Independent Women's Organisation Tasmania. This was a peak body formed by the Centre and other feminist services to enable us to have a strong voice when negotiating the Changing Relations process with DHHS.

On the wider political front, in 2001 doubts arose as to the legality of abortion in Tasmania, despite the fact that it had been performed here for decades. To clarify this situation, it was proposed to introduce a bill to make abortion on demand legal in Tasmania. Naturally a great deal of controversy resulted, with the HWHC being in the forefront of those supporting freedom of choice, as part of the People for Choice group.

The proposal to legalise abortion on demand was dropped, but in December 2001 both houses of parliament were recalled for a conscience vote, not to change the law, but to formally recognise the status quo. As a result, although abortion in this state remains in the criminal code, its legality is confirmed in cases where the life of the woman or her psychological wellbeing is at risk.

Similarly, as early as 2001 the Centre was supporting calls for RU486 to be treated like any other drug and be assessed by the Therapeutic Goods Administration rather than be classified as 'restricted goods' reviewed only by the Federal Health Minister. In 2006 we wrote a submission to the Senate Inquiry into this matter. In February that year the Senate finally removed the Health Minister's veto over this drug.

Just in case we thought we could relax, in September 2008 we found ourselves opposing a motion before the Senate to withdraw Medicare funding for second trimester abortions. This motion was withdrawn.

Speaking of Medicare, Hobart Women's Health Centre was a founding member of TasMAG, (Tasmanian Medicare Action Group). In 2003 we appeared before the Senate enquiry into Medicare to state our concerns that Medicare was in danger of becoming a watered down, non-universal system. We also spoke in support of Medicare at a rally and a public forum.

In the area of service delivery, a recognition of the role of creativity and the arts in health runs through the Centre's history (and the mural is part of this tradition), as well as an element of fun.

Who can forget such initiatives as the Spectacular Speculums competition, with works of art created from speculums, examples of which are still dotted around the Centre? What fun, what frivolity and what a wonderful way of promoting PAP smears!

And what about Leaky Lil? An art installation courtesy of Senior Momentum, she sat on her loo dribbling away in our courtyard and provoked many useful conversations about continence and how to maintain or regain it.

As workers it is not uncommon to hear gales of laughter coming from the Backspace. For some reason fitball classes provoke much mirth, particularly in the early stages as women lose control of their fitballs. Equally groups explaining the reproductive organs and the need for PAP smears to African women often result in much laughter and wonderment.

In summary, the Centre has accomplished a lot in its 21 years. We have been at the forefront of taking health out of surgeries and into the community; and have promoted holistic health responses. The acknowledgment that social determinants, including gender, effect health has become widespread, possibly mainstream, and we have played our part in this.

Obviously many other things have changed in 21 years. The social climate is different now than it was in the 70's and the Centre has changed with the times and continues to do so. However some things remain constant for the Centre: chief among these are its feminist philosophy and the dedication of its staff, board, allied health workers and other supporters. Another constant is the wonderful women who access the service and all our supporters.

Much has been achieved for women's health but there are still many issues needing to be addressed, and the work of the Centre is as necessary and relevant today as it was 21 years ago.

I ask you all to join with us to celebrate the first 21 years and to embark on the challenges and opportunities of the future.

I shall now hand over to Lisa Singh, newly appointed Minister for Corrections and Consumer Protection and Minister for Work Place Relations, who is to launch our Women on the Wall mural. Welcome and congratulations on your appointment to the ministry.

It is fitting that Lisa is with us today. She has a background in women's services and is a past member of our board of management. I am sure she will appreciate the mural and its depiction of the diversity of women.

**Joan Barry**