

# Women's Health Initiatives *in* British Columbia

REPORT BY THE WOMEN'S HEALTH BUREAU

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## Welcome to the Women's Health Initiatives Report

Highlights include "snapshot" summaries of the various women's health initiatives funded by the Ministry of Health and Ministry Responsible for Seniors and updates from previously funded program areas now funded by the Ministry of Children and Families. We hope you find the information useful.

### HIGHLIGHTS INSIDE

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### HOW TO CONTACT US

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## Why focus on women's health issues?

**W**omen use the health care system more frequently than men. The most significant reasons are that women: live longer than men, suffer more ill health than men, have childbearing responsibilities and have a greater incidence of disabilities and chronic illnesses (Provincial Health Officer's Annual Report, 1995). Women are also more likely to be affected by economic instability and violence.

- ▶ In British Columbia a disproportionate number of women over the age of 65 and single parent mothers struggle to survive on low incomes. Without adequate income it is hard to obtain safe and secure housing and nutritional food. Women are also concentrated in lower status occupations. Low income and low social status is associated with poor health.
- ▶ In BC, 59 per cent of women report experiencing at least one incident of physical or sexual violence since they were 16 years old (Statistics Canada, 1993).
- ▶ Women are the primary informal caregivers to family members, friends and neighbours. Women often carry a double workload: one in the home and one in the paid work force. More than 72 per cent of the informal caregivers in BC are women. Trying to balance these home and work responsibilities can affect both the physical and mental health of women, and the health of their children and families (Provincial Health Officer's Annual Report, 1995).



## Women's Health Bureau

*Ministry of Health and Ministry Responsible for Seniors*

**T**he Women's Health Bureau promotes a health care system which is sensitive to the unique needs of women. The Bureau addresses a number of women's health issues by working within government, partnering with organizations and liaising with community groups and health care providers.

### The Women's Health Bureau:

- supports policies that are appropriate and sensitive to the needs of women, and ensures program development and funding takes women's health needs into consideration;
- fosters ongoing communication with women's health advocates in the community and in government, and acts as a contact point within government for community organizations;
- enhances understanding of women's health care issues among government and health care providers;
- collaborates with other government ministries to address the broader determinants of women's health and;
- provides secretariat support to the Minister's Advisory Council on Women's Health.

### The Women's Health Bureau initiatives includes:

- policy development on new reproductive technology;
- information reports on bone mineral density;
- establishing the BC bone health strategy;
- collaborative action research projects on women-centered care;
- identification of the health issues of marginalized women;
- improving reproductive and birthing options for women;
- improving health response to violence against women;
- eating disorders initiatives;
- mid-life women's health education project.

One of the projects that the Women's Health Bureau has initiated includes research on how women's health issues are being addressed since the implementation of health care restructuring.

Research findings indicate that women's health issues have not been overlooked at local or regional levels. However, mechanisms to ensure the inclusion of women's health issues on the planning agenda of health authorities will require on-going attention and improvement as the health system evolves. The following highlights various health authority approaches that have included participation of women's organizations in the planning process.

- Vancouver/Richmond Health Board Population Health Advisory committees includes women and other groups in health planning. Their \$5 million Community Innovation Fund is used for mental health, determinants of health, health promotion, and the development and organization of health centre committees.

The mandate of the Women's Population Health Advisory Committee is to assist and advise the Vancouver/Richmond Health Board on identifying and prioritizing health needs of women, comprehensive planning, and monitoring and evaluating health



outcomes. The committee has used research information and community consultation processes in their identification of priority health issues for women in the Vancouver/Richmond health region. The issues include poverty, violence against women, access to health services, participation in health and medicalization of women's lives.

- "Women's Access to Regional Health Planning" pilot project was conducted by the Kamloops Women's Resource Group Society to give women from the Thompson region a voice at the Regional Health Board on issues that affect women's lives. The intent of the project was to address the social determinants of health by raising interest and awareness among women. Leadership development, information, resources and support for each participating community was provided by the Kamloops Women's Resource Centre. Each community was then provided the opportunity to present their issues, actions and processes to the health board.
- The Central Coast Community Health council has taken an innovative approach based on the premise that small communities always find a way to deal with the resources they have. Profits from the hospital pharmacy are divided between the hospital (60%) and community (40%). The money is used to

upgrade the hospital and to fund community programs. The communities decide what they would like to do and then the community health council helps to coordinate.

Dean Island put together a workshop on wellness initiatives which lead to lifestyle

change. Men chose recovery issues and women identified stress, nutritional and financial management. This has led to the formation of a women's

### Minister's Advisory Council on Women's Health

The Minister's Advisory Council (MAC) on Women's Health was established in September 1994 and is funded by the Women's Health Bureau. The council consists of women who represent the cultural and regional diversity of British Columbia. The council's mandate is to advise the Minister of Health on issues relating to the health needs of women, the development of health care policy and the delivery of women's health services. Current priorities for action include violence, regionalization and mental health. Priority actions include:

- A research grant allocated to "Towards an Agenda for Change: Strengthening the Response of the Health Care System to Violence Against Women in BC." A one day conference will take place in Kamloops in October of 1998, where the first report of the research will be presented to organizations concerned with aspects of violence.
- A one-day session held in March, '98 on women's health issues with the board chairs and CEO's of the health authorities and representatives from other health organizations. Ongoing work with the Health Association of BC and health authorities.
- A review of the 1998 Mental Health Plan by the Minister's Advisory Committee.
- The report Alcohol and Other Drug Problems and BC Women was submitted to the Minister of Health from the MAC, November 1997, (Nancy Poole, Consultant). This report outlines concerns, opportunities, and recommendations for maintaining and enhancing a system of care for women with alcohol and other drug problems, and/or those women at risk of developing such problems. For copies of the report please contact the Women's Health Bureau at (250) 952-2256.



group, a support network, and a Safe House.

The report on regionalization and women's health issues will be available in the summer of 1998 upon request. Please contact Women's Health Bureau at (250) 952-2256.

## Aboriginal Women's Health

**A** boriginal Health Division of the Ministry of Health funds various community intervention programs. Of these programs, two specifically target women's health. The First Nations Women's Group of Prince Rupert provides health care education services with an emphasis on women's health to aboriginal people from Prince Rupert and the surrounding area. Services are operated through a health education resource centre.

The second program involves the Port Alberni Women's Resources Society. The society receives funds to assist in providing the services of a counsellor for a Sexual Abuse Intervention Program for children and teens in Port Alberni and area.

## Children's and Women's Health Centre of BC

In March 1994, BC Women's Hospital and Health Centre was established as a provincial resource to provide a full range of women's health services to British Columbia women. B.C. Women's provides health care for women in the areas of:

- osteoporosis
- infertility
- recurrent pregnancy loss
- sexual health
- contraception
- abortion services and counselling
- midwifery
- prenatal diagnosis
- comprehensive pregnancy care
- premenstrual syndrome
- breast health
- reproductive psychiatry
- HIV/AIDS
- sexual assault program
- sexual assault emergency care and follow-up counselling
- community education on women's health issues
- residential and non-residential women's addictions centre
- cervical screening program for aboriginal women.

Women's Health Centre operates an aboriginal health program designed to address the high rates of cervical cancer among aboriginal women. The program has

offered two training programs for aboriginal women's health providers, a community pilot program for a women's health clinic, and responded to community requests for mobile clinics to perform pap smears.

The Provincial Pregnancy Options Referral Service is a component of the Comprehensive Abortion and Reproductive Education (CARE) Program offered by the Women's Health Centre. The goals of the program are to ensure that all women who are faced with an unintended pregnancy, particularly those residing in rural and under-served areas of the province, are served as close to their home as possible and in a timely manner. The confidential service provides information, counselling and referrals to women with unplanned pregnancies, and information to health care providers. For further information, please call Provincial Pregnancy Options Referral Service, at 1-888-875-3163 or (604)875-3163. The Planned Parenthood Association of BC (PPABC) Facts of Life information line is 1-800-739-7367.

## Eating Disorders

The Ministry of Health approved funding for an Eating Disorders Residential Facility for children and adolescents with severe eating disorders in





Vancouver (February, 1998). The residence is operated by Children's and Women's Health Centre of BC.

The Provincial Steering Committee on Eating Disorders was created in early 1995 and is an advisory body to the provincial Ministry of Health. In 1996, the Committee initiated a provincial eating disorder services needs assessment. Two preliminary reports were submitted in February, 1998 by researchers, Alexander Niblock, MA, and Diane Anderson.

Prominent themes of the research include: i) recognition that there is a continuum of disordered eating; and, ii) access to eating disordered / disordered eating services is restricted to only the sickest of those with anorexia or bulimia.

The Eating Disorders Prevention Sub-Committee is in the process of developing an interministerial policy framework on eating disorders. To contact the Eating Disorder Resource Centre of B.C. phone 1-800-665-1822 or in Vancouver at 631-5313.

## Breast Health / Screening Mammography

The BC Women's Foundation together with BC Tel, Coast Hotels, the Canadian Cancer Society, and the Women's Health Bureau of the Ministry of Health and Ministry Responsible for Seniors sponsored a video-conference on breast health. A simulta-

neous broadcast in Victoria, Vancouver, Kamloops, Kelowna and Prince George was held on May 6, 1998. The tele-conferences are set in a panel discussion format where various topics are discussed (eg. breast implants, nutrition and cancer). The second of the series of video-conferences will be focused on menopause. Contact: BC Women's Foundation at (604) 875-2270.

The Women's Health Bureau has contributed funds toward

increasing awareness of breast cancer issues and research through information and educational forums. Forums in 19 communities have taken place and will be continuing through '98. For further information contact: Breast Cancer Information line at 1-800-663-2524 or (604) 897-2323.

## Screening Mammography

Research shows that 20 to 30 per cent fewer breast cancer deaths can be expected if woman ages 50 - 69 have a screening mammogram at least once every two years. Many people do not realize that increasing age is the strongest risk factor for breast cancer. Family doctors should review the benefits of screening with individual women, since their recommendation is the most important influence on a woman's decision to attend screening.

The Screening Mammography Program of BC has partnered with Children's and Women's Health Centre in Vancouver to establish a breast assessment centre. Screening and diagnostic services are designed to provide women with a definitive diagnosis within a week. After 10 years of operating, the screening mammography program screened its one millionth participant in late July. For information contact the Screening Mammography Program at 1-800-663-9203 or 660-3923.

The Medical Services Commission has released New Protocol for the Use of Diagnostic Facilities for Mammography. The protocol makes it clear that screening mammography should be provided by the Screening Mammography Program of British Columbia in most circumstances, lists criteria for diagnostic mammogram which are billable to the Medical Services Plan (MSP) and describes a limited range of circumstances guiding screening mammograms performed in diagnostic facilities and billed to MSP.



## Sexual Assault Services / Domestic Violence

The BC Ministry of Health funds Children's and Women's Health Centre of BC to help communities develop programs for women who have been sexually assaulted. The programs include, Sexual Assault Service, Emergency Hospital Service and a Violence Against Women in Relationship Project.

Since 1982, the Sexual Assault Service has provided care to victims of sexual assault in the Vancouver area. The 24-hour service offers a sensitive medical examination and forensic evidence collection, as well as treatment for Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and pregnancy. The team works closely with the community to deliver specialized services, with a large public education and training focus. A Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner course in British Columbia has also been developed. If you would like more information about the BC Women's Sexual Assault Service, call the coordinator at (604) 875-2881, or contact the Sexual Assault Nurse Educator (SANE) Training Co-ordinator at (604) 875-3284 or fax (604) 875-3136.

Emergency Hospital Service provides confidential and sensitive medical care for teens and adults who have been sexually assaulted. Examinations take place at Vancouver Hospital Emergency Department, 920 West 10th Ave., Vancouver, BC V5Z 1M9 Tel: (604) 875-4995.

Recognizing that there is a negative impact on the mental and physical health of women who experience abuse in intimate relationships, Children and Women's Health Centre initiated the Violence Against Women in Relationship Project in November, 1996. The program provides training and support to all health care practitioners at BC Women's in the area of woman abuse. The purpose of the program is to implement educational processes that develop and support a women-centred health care practice for nurses, physicians and other allied health professionals. The focus of the program is to ensure that all women are provided with a safe and confidential opportunity to discuss relationship abuse and the health impact of that abuse with their health care practitioner. The program also provides consultation and support to community-based groups and health organizations throughout the province who are developing domestic violence programs.

Residential Historical Abuse Program (RHAP) is funded by the Ministry of Health, Ministry for Children and Families, Attorney General and the Ministry of Education. RHAP provides counselling and support to British Columbians who were sexually abused while living in provincially funded residential facilities. Services are provided through registered clinicians and established non-profit counselling agencies across B.C. Applications and more information on the

RHAP are available through Victim Assistance Program of Offices and Mental Health Centres or you may call the Ministry of Attorney General's toll-free information line at 1-800-563-0808.

## Tobacco And Women

The goal of the Tobacco Reduction Strategy (TRS), located within the Ministry of Health and Ministry Responsible for Seniors, is to reduce the number of smokers in BC. This is accomplished through prevention, cessation, and protection measures.

One of the strategies specifically related to women includes the Women and Tobacco Grant Program, offered in partnership with the Canadian Cancer Society, BC and Yukon Division, and the TRS. This program provides one-time funding for community-based demonstration projects, beginning 1997 and ending in February of 1999. For information on the 10 projects located in various BC communities contact the Canadian Cancer Society (604) 872-4400.

## Seniors' Advisory Council of British Columbia

The Seniors' Advisory Council was established in 1989 by proclamation of the Seniors' Advisory Council Act. The coun-



cil consists of appointed members who represent the diversity of British Columbia seniors by region, age, gender, ethnicity and relevant experience. The council's mandate is to advise the Minister of Health and Minister Responsible for Seniors on current and future issues of concern to BC's seniors, represent seniors interests and maintain communication with major seniors' and service organizations. The Office for Seniors of the Ministry of Health and Ministry Responsible for Seniors provides administrative and research support to the council.

In 1995 the Seniors Advisory Council's Women and Aging Task Force was established to examine the concerns of older women in BC and consider ways in which their independence might be maintained and enhanced. The task force has conducted several focus groups throughout the province and a survey questionnaire was distributed to 1300 older BC women. The task force is analyzing this information and a full report with recommendations is forthcoming. For information on the Senior s'Advisor y Council or the Office for Seniors, contact the Office for Seniors, Ministr y of Health and Ministr y Responsible for Seniors at (250) 952-1238.

## Mental Health Services

The Ministry of Health and Ministry Responsible for Seniors, Revitalizing and Rebalancing British Columbia's Mental Health System: The 1998 Mental Health Plan outlines services, planning, and care that will better serve women with mental illness. To obtain a copy of T he 1998 Mental Health, please contact Adult Mental Health Division, Ministr y of Health at (250) 952-1629.

## HIV/AIDS Education, Prevention, Care and Support Services

The Ministry of Health and Ministry Responsible for Seniors provides HIV/AIDS education, prevention, care, and support services through various programs. These programs include health promotion, prevention, outreach, education, treatment, medication, continuing care, street workers, street nurse program, AIDS information line, and testing. The Ministry of Health also funds community agencies dedicated to serving women through the:

- Positive Women's Network which focuses on support for HIV positive women in the areas of housing, poverty and child care; and the,
- National Congress of Black Women Foundation.

The AIDS information hotline is 1-800-661-4337.

## Alcohol and Drug Treatment Services for Women

Through the Ministry for Children and Families, Alcohol and Drug Services supports the delivery of a comprehensive range of alcohol and drug treatment programs that must follow gender specific policies. The range of programs and services designed specifically to meet the unique needs of women with substance misuse problems include assessment, education, individual or group counselling, day/evening/weekend programs, residential treatment, supportive recovery and family counselling. All counselling services are confidential and are provided free of charge. (An accommodation fee charge for residential services is applicable). For information on treatment services available in your area, contact the Alcohol and Drug Information and Referral Service 1-800-663-1441.

"Mom and Kids" at Peardonville House, in Abbotsford is a program for women with substance misuse issues where they can attend with their pre-school children. A similar model program is being planned for the North and will be located in Prince George. For information contact the Ministry of Children and Families at (250) 953-3143 .



For information on prevention of substance misuse, informational materials and research, contact Prevention Source B.C. at 1-800-663-1880.

## Pregnancy and Parenting Resources

Through the Ministry for Children and Families, the Nobody's Perfect Parenting Program is intended to increase the parenting skill and self-esteem of parents who are young, single, low-income, isolated and require support with nurturing skills.

Prenatal Education Access is supported through initiatives such as:

- **Baby's Best Chance: Parents' Handbook of Pregnancy and Baby Care** (provided free of charge to every expectant mother in BC);
- **Baby's Best Chance video** may be borrowed free of charge through health units, public libraries and other community services. It is also available from the BC Council for Families in Chinese, Punjabi, Spanish and Vietnamese and
- **Community prenatal classes** (full or partial subsidy available).

**Pregnancy Outreach Program** provides counselling on nutrition, smoking, alcohol and drug misuse, and promotes breast feeding. Particular attention is paid to prevention of low birth-weight and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

**Breastfeeding:** The Ministry promotes and supports breastfeeding by initiatives such as BC Baby Friendly Resource Binder, World Breastfeeding Week and Baby Friendly decals for businesses and mobilizing communities to implement the Baby Friendly Initiative.

**Postnatal services** includes public health nurse telephone contact and home visits. The purpose of this service is to provide support and guidance to parents with newborns. "Baby Hot Lines" are arranged through health units and hospitals to serve as additional resources for new mothers and their families.

**Nutrition programs** primarily aimed at women include community gardens, community kitchens, support for school meal programs and child day cares. Please contact your local Health Unit for more information on any of the above programs. The telephone number can be found in the blue pages of your phone book.

**New Initiatives:** The Ministry for Children and Families has committed \$3 million to new initiatives across the province for children from before birth to age five. Pilot projects are identified on a range of factors affecting family

health, including infant mortality rates, teen pregnancy rates, alcohol sales per capita and numbers of single parents on income assistance.

**Midwifery** became a regulated and publicly funded profession in British Columbia on January 1, 1998. Registered midwives are independent practitioners regulated by the College of Midwives of British Columbia. Registered midwives providing services (including home visits) are funded by the Ministry of Health. Also on January 1, 1998, the Ministry of Health began a Home Birth Demonstration Project (HBDP) which will monitor and evaluate the integration of all planned home births attended by registered midwives into the health care system over a two-year period. Sixty-six clients are currently enrolled in the HBDP. The HBDP is mandated by the Midwives Regulation of the Health Professions Act. For further information call the College of Midwives at (604) 875-3580.