

Perhaps you've never heard of All Women's Health Services—the only independent, nonprofit women's health center in Oregon. But considering the quarter of a million women they estimate having helped so far, chances are good you know someone who's connected to it.

Unfortunately, what makes All Women's unique—an assiduous commitment to provide health care for all women regardless of financial status—is now what casts a shadow on its future. A failing economy and severe funding cuts threaten to leave the 6,000 patients it sees annually with nowhere else to go.

A large yet unassuming clinic in Northeast Portland, All Women's has had its doors open to women for 30 years. "Women are so central to the health of the community and families," board president Vicki Reitenauer says. "Women are at the core of organizations. If they aren't healthy, those entities aren't healthy." So, by serving women, especially those who would otherwise not have access to high-quality care, All Women's serves the entire Portland community.

The clinic opened in 1973 with a singular mission: to provide truly comprehensive health care to all women in a respectful and supportive environment. Today it is holding as tightly as ever to that mission: Members of the Oregon Health Plan make up 65 percent of its total clientele, and it is the only clinic in Portland that accepts OHP on an ongoing basis. All Women's also has assembled an all-female medical staff of doctors, naturopaths, nurse practitioners and assistants who are dedicated to consulting with a woman about any health care concern she might have.

The fact that a woman can have all aspects of her health addressed at the clinic makes it unique. Typically she would have to go to one provider for her reproductive health needs, another provider for her general health questions and yet another if she sought a specialized procedure like an abortion. But All Women's has broken the mold and cast a new one.

"We don't want to perpetuate the idea that certain services need to be walled off from other services," Reitenauer says. "We are trying to shift the paradigm of women's health care and what that means...trying to address a woman's health concerns through the span of her life, holistically. Whether she be lesbian, bisexual or straight."

As a lesbian herself, Reitenauer understands the problems that arise when a health care provider assumes certain things about a patient that are incorrect. In most clinics, it is not uncommon for a physician to discuss birth control options with a woman without taking into consideration her sexual orientation. They key to avoiding misunderstanding,

INTENSIVE CARE

All Women's Health Services invites patients to participate in their own wellness by J.B. Rabin



PHOTO BY MARY DAVIS

Reitenauer explains, is to offer individualized care to each patient.

The staff members "talk about what it means to welcome all women," she says. "We are about partnering with each woman to elicit what her needs are so the practitioner can be her partner. We don't make assumptions about anyone's sexual practices or how one identifies."

Unfortunately, this kind of care has always been the exception to the rule. "The age-old power struggle in medicine has always been about keeping you in the dark about what's going on," says Pamela Jeanne, a naturopathic physician at All Women's.

A former nurse, she wasn't satisfied in a system where doctors were perceived to be the only ones who could unlock the mystery of a woman's health. She wanted to give the key back to the women themselves, a belief that aligns strongly with the practices of All Women's.

"We do things in such an open way. We share lab results with patients," says Jeanne, who is a lesbian. "Whatever you want to know, it's here. There are no secrets."

It is the patient's participation in her own well-

ness that makes All Women's stand out from other facilities. And that is what the women who work there appreciate most about it. "It's very intimate being with someone when they decide how they want to be healthy and whole," Reitenauer says.

Jeanne adds: "It's always been my dream to help a woman feel empowered so that she can pursue her life's dream. When you have information about your body, the more power you have."

The clinic's commitment to educating women about their health is most evident in the amount of time they allot for each visit. "We didn't want to be one of those clinics that say: 'What's the matter? Here's your prescription. See you later,'" Reitenauer says.

The first visit at All Women's is typically an

hour long and "oftentimes it is just to talk and evaluate all the health issues," Jeanne says. "Most clinics are run from a business perspective where you have to see so many people per hour and a woman can only ask so many questions. At All Women's we take our time—there's a whole other level of caring not being dictated by money."

There are some concerns about whether this long-standing fixture of the community will be able to continue offering that level of care, or any level of care. The clinic's financial woes began last year—after its annual budget was already in place—when the Oregon Health Plan made the decree that it would be paying only 34 cents on the dollar for billed care.

"That's not enough to keep a clinic running," says bookkeeper Tony Musso, who is gay. "We definitely need the support of the whole Portland community."

The bleak financial situation has caused All Women's to lay off some of its administrative staff, and it is calling for volunteers to help fill in some of the gaps. The clinic also welcomes physicians, naturopaths, acupuncturists and other health care providers willing to volunteer their time for the community.

As far as donations are concerned, Musso says: "It doesn't take much from each person. Sure, we love \$10,000 donations from corporations, but people donate small amounts monthly—that all adds up. Those \$20 and \$30 checks we get each month from people help keep the doors open."

The 10 staff members who are now at the clinic have taken on double duty and are adamant about the success of All Women's. "It's not going to be easy, but we can turn it around," Musso says. "It's not if we can. We have to. We have to be here for the community. That's what this is about." □

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—Pamela Jeanne

ALL WOMEN'S HEALTH SERVICES will raffle off July 7 an \$8,500 train trip on the American Orient Express along with a second-place prize of a two-night stay at the Sylvia Beach Hotel in Newport and a third-place prize of dinner at Billy Reed's Restaurant & Bar. Tickets cost \$20 and can be purchased at the clinic and at its booth during Portland Pride 2003 on June 14 and 15 in Waterfront Park. For more information call 503-233-0808 or visit www.allwomens.org.

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