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Got a Cervix?

Planned Parenthood fills the gap between being yourself and getting health care

Some years ago, I found myself under-employed, without health insurance and in need of birth control pills. What does a lesbian need with birth control, you might ask? I happen to be someone who, for physiological reasons, needs hormonal assistance for a regular menstrual cycle. I went to Planned Parenthood because I, like millions of women in this country, know where low-income people can get this certain need met. Thank God.

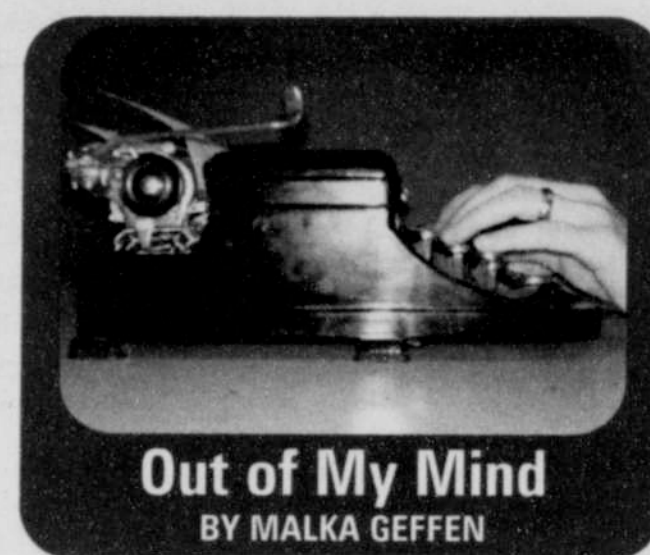
But I also knew that I wouldn't be getting the goods if I said they weren't for contraceptive purposes. So I did not divulge my sexual orientation but said, simply, that I wasn't partnering with a man at the moment. I got my drugs and went on my merry way. Still, I felt terribly uncomfortable with this arrangement. Lucky for me, I didn't go without health care coverage for too long, and I was back with my culturally competent doctor in time for my next annual exam.

Women who partner with women and trans men and women face certain barriers to appropriate health care, and this system was just another example.

But not around here. Not anymore.

Pride Foundation awarded money Nov. 5 to Planned Parenthood of the Columbia/Willamette for a new program that gives low-income lesbian, bisexual women and trans people who don't need birth control (or, as in my case, don't need it for contraception) equal access to annual exams and Pap tests.

I recently sat down with grants manager Audrey Milner and patient service staff and queer advisory committee members Kimber Nelson and Gillian Beck to discuss the need for the Equal Access Fund.



we created an in-house fund to fill that gap. There are higher rates of breast and reproductive cancers among women who partner with women and the trans population. A good part of that is due to the lack of preventative health care. So while everybody needs routine preventative health care, this population clearly statistically needs better financial access to services and culturally competent care.

MG: Do other Planned Parenthood affiliates offer anything similar?

GB: We're the first in this country that's providing this funding.

KN: With the \$3,000 from Pride Foundation and \$3,000 from our staff, board and community members, as well as an additional \$4,000 we're raising, we'll be able to serve 72 patients between now and June 2008.

AM: We're the first affiliate and family planning provider in the country to offer women access to hormonal contraception online. We're the first to offer Essure—outpatient female sterilization. The Equal Access Fund is our most recent first.



From left, Audrey Milner, Kimber Nelson and Gillian Beck help people access basic reproductive and sexual health care.

Malka Geffen: How did the Equal Access Fund come about?

Gillian Beck: The Family Planning Expansion Project (FPEP) is a state and federally funded program that covers birth control and annual exams for low-income women seeking to prevent pregnancy. But we were concerned that women who partner with women who aren't seeking birth control aren't eligible for this fund. We saw the need for another fund that provides equal levels of coverage for low-income women who partner with women and trans individuals.

Audrey Milner: We have low-income patients who would have to lie about who they partner with to access basic health care services. Or, if they say openly that they're not looking for birth control, they aren't eligible for FPEP and have to pay \$140 out of pocket.

Kimber Nelson: This inhibits appropriate medical conversations between our nurses and those patients about their sexual history and risk factors. So

both of which are unfortunately untrue. It's just as important for them to get screenings for cervical and breast cancer every year because HPV can be transmitted between any partners, regardless of what their genders or anatomies are.

AM: One in four American women has chosen Planned Parenthood for health care at least once in her life.

KN: So the reach of our health care system has the opportunity to be a real catalyst for change. Starting at the local level here is really empowering. **jo**

PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF THE COLUMBIA/WILLAMETTE launched the Equal Access Fund on Oct. 22. For more information visit www.plannedparenthood.org/ppcw. You can send donations to 3231 S.E. 50th Ave., Portland, OR 97206.

MALKA GEFFEN has plenty of room in her head. Fill it by e-mailing malkageffen@gmail.com.