

NORTHWEST NEWS

To Her Health

OHSU Studies Explore Contraception and More

By KATHRYN MARTINI

Researchers from the Women's Health Research Unit (WHRU) at Oregon Health & Science University (OHSU) have been conducting research on women's health issues for over twenty years. They are currently conducting studies on contraception and seek research participants, specifically participants not at risk of becoming pregnant. Consequently, lesbian women are perfect candidates to assist with this kind of work, which includes monetary compensation as well as free healthcare throughout the study.

According to Jennifer Rhodes, a research assistant in the WHRU for two years, there are several current studies that need subjects, and future studies are in the works including the contraceptive ring, a female condom, a progesterone-only birth control patch and emergency contraception. "Human subject research is a safe enterprise," says Rhodes. "Being involved in a study allows women to be a part of women's healthcare. It's women working with women for women!"

Amy Olson is currently participating in a study on a contraceptive ring. She has just finished the first phase of the nine-month program, which examines hormone levels in

the body and changes in the uterine lining over the duration. Olson became involved when a friend who works at the Women's Health Research Unit approached her.

"They wanted study participants who had zero to slight chance of getting pregnant," Olson explains. "Since I've been a lesbian my entire life, I'm an ideal candidate." She was able to commit to the study's itinerary, which included twice weekly visits to the clinic for the first six weeks, the insertion of two separate rings and a cervical biopsy—which she said didn't hurt as much as a piercing.

Olson agreed to the study primarily for the money, but also for the chance to do something for others. She feels strongly that contraceptive research is not just about contraception but also about women's health. "Lesbians want to have babies just as much as heterosexual women," Olson states.

"We are a population that isn't typically included when studying reproductive health, and many of us don't know a lot about it." Olson also notes the importance of contraception for population control and protection for all women against unwanted pregnancy. "You never know what will happen," she says. "The less you understand about something, the less prepared you will be if something were to happen."

Rhodes agrees and hopes to bring more exposure to the studies. "As women, we are



Amy Olson has just finished the first phase of an OHSU study on a contraceptive ring.

a new form of birth control that does not contain estrogen and is delivered vaginally. According to Rhodes, many women have a difficult time with estrogen due to health reasons or rare side effects. The mission of both the Population Control Council and the Women's Health Research Unit is to improve reproductive health for women worldwide.

To qualify as a study participant women must be at least 18 years old, not at risk for pregnancy and have normal menstrual cycles. Qualified applicants are given a comprehensive medical work-up including full blood panels and regular testing; they're also cared for by a principal OB/GYN. All medical care is covered and, in the case of the contraceptive ring, participants are paid upon completion of each phase—up to several thousand dollars.

Olson has already paid off some bills but plans to do something fun with the remainder of the money, like getting a tattoo or going on an extravagant vacation. She encourages other lesbians to participate, not only for the financial benefit but because of the positive experience she has had working with researchers—and the satisfaction of helping others.

Women interested in learning more can confidentially contact Willow at the WHRU, 503-494-3666 or whru@ohsu.edu.

all in this together," she says. "Contraception and contraceptive issues are not exclusively heterosexual—they are women's issues." She adds that contraception isn't just used for birth control and that many women are on hormonal contraception for other medical reasons, including minimizing heavy bleeding, regulating cycles, managing menstrual side effects, maintaining skin complexion and eliminating periods all together.

The Population Control Council, an international, nonprofit, non-governmental organization, sponsors the contraceptive ring study. It began in the summer of 2008 in the Dominican Republic and Chile, and at OHSU in April of this year. The ring is

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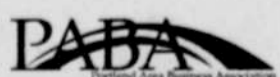
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