

★ ARMED FORCES ★

Special Edition

Veterans Benefits *for* Women

continued ▲ from front

services.

"Everything from medicinal needs to exam table needs is different for men and women," said Women Veterans Program Manager Nancy Sloan. Four years ago, when she first began working for the Portland VA, physicians didn't have the capacity to do gynecological exams because there were no stirrups.

The health center, which opened Sept. 10, offers gynecological and urological services, primary care, cervical and breast cancer screening and treatment, family planning, nutritional guidance, mental health care, and much more.

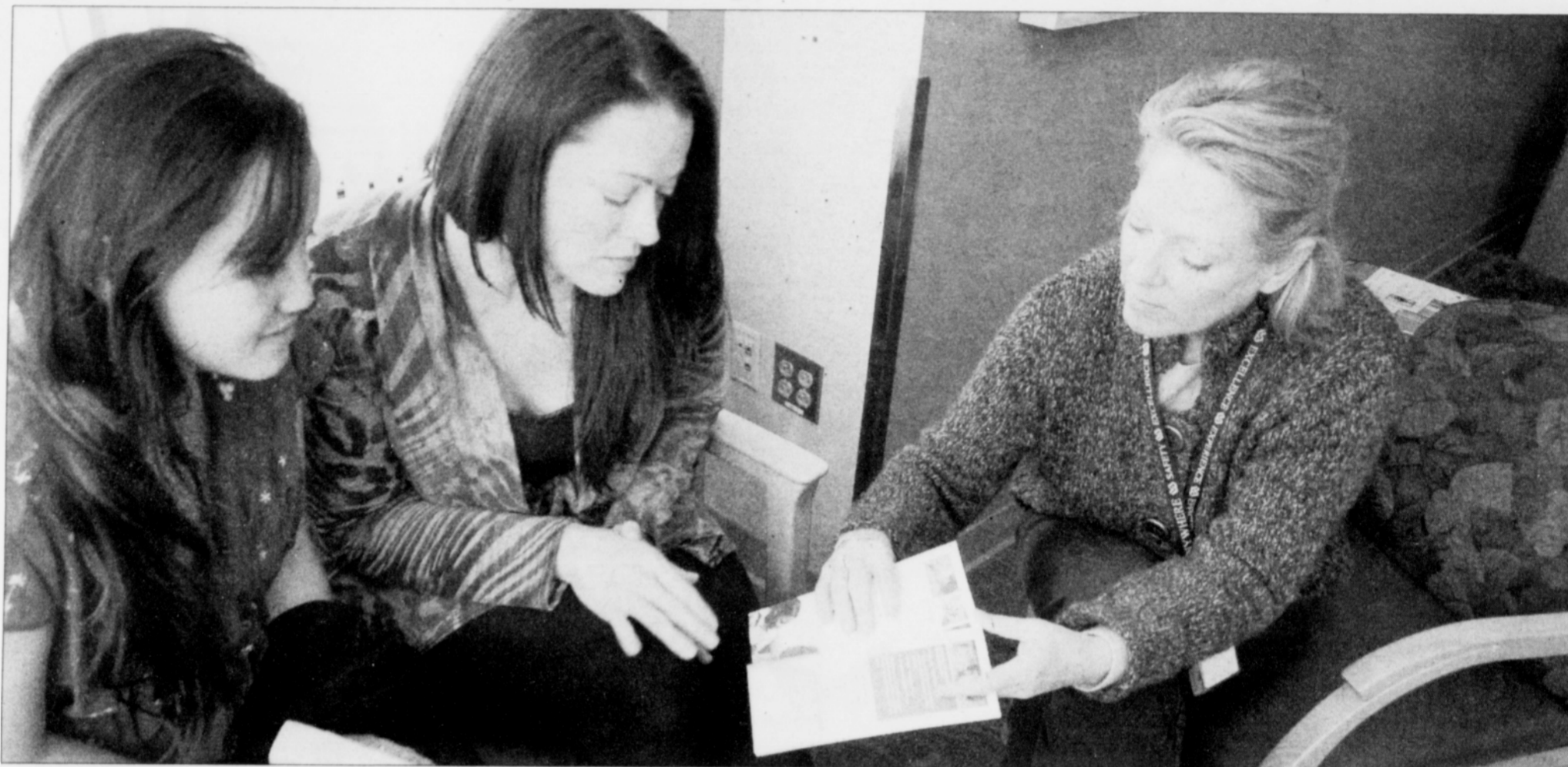


PHOTO BY MARK WASHINGTON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Women Veterans Program Manager Nancy Sloan (from right) shows U.S. Marine Corp veteran Kim Wilkie and Army veteran Milly Bui some of the health care offerings at the new Center for Women Veterans Health.

Milly Bui, who served in the Army from 2002 to 2005, has been pleased with the new facility's offerings.

"It's actually been great," she said. "Before the women's health center, I had many different primary care physicians, and since it's opened, I've had one."

Bui added that the medical services offered have seemed quicker as well — whether getting an appointment, time spent in the waiting room, or needing to see someone without an appointment.

The nearly 4,000-square-foot facility is located in the southeast section of the Portland VA Medical Center which sits across from the Oregon Health Sciences University campus in southwest Portland.

With a separate entrance, soothing colors, sculptures, and female physicians, the health center space is meant to be a calm refuge for the up to 3,400 qualifying women veterans in Oregon and southwest Washington who served the country in situations that were sometimes mentally and physically brutal.

Government-funded through federal economic stimulus money, the facility cost \$300,000 to build, and sees about 150 to

200 women a week. Sloan expects that rate to double in the upcoming months, as the urological and gynecological staff settles into the new space.

The use of the Portland VA by women grew about 15 percent last year, a higher growth rate than by men. That trend is expected to continue with the increasing enlistments of females in the military.

Sloan says patients are also younger. About 30 percent to 40 percent of the women served by the Portland VA facilities are under the age of 40. The average age of patients four years ago was 45-50, but is much lower today, averaging 20-30 years old, she said.

Former U.S. Marine Kim Wilkie said that it had previously been "a little awkward to 'smoke 'n joke' with the guys" in the Portland VA hospital's waiting room before getting examined. She says that medical providers at the new facility have made her feel more comfortable because they take a more holistic approach.

"They want to know what's going on in all aspects of my life, and we have more of a dialogue," Wilkie explained. "It's not just 'you're here for a problem, let's treat that problem.'"

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