

OBITUARY

Barbara Seaman (1935-2008): pioneer in the women's health movement

Women's health lost a powerful champion with the death of Barbara Seaman, an author, journalist and patients' rights advocate, on Feb. 27, 2008, at her Manhattan home in New York City, New York. She had been living with lung cancer.

Seaman was a founder of the women's health movement in North America in the 1970s and paved the way for patients' rights. She is best known for her writings on drug safety, particularly her early warnings about the dangerously high levels of estrogen in the first generation of contraceptive pills, and more recently, the overprescription of hormone therapy for menopausal women.

For sounding the alarm on the safety profile of these and other medications, and for insisting that there be proper warning labels on drugs, Seaman was publicly castigated and labeled an uninformed troublemaker. But, as with so much of Seaman's work, time proved her both prophetic and deeply wise.

Her landmark book on hormonal contraceptives, *The Doctors' Case Against the Pill* (1969), initiated congress-

sional hearings into the safety of birth control pills (1970) in the United States and catapulted women's health issues into the national spotlight. By the 1980s, the dosage of estrogen in oral contraceptives had been drastically reduced.

The hearings she helped bring about also resulted in the creation of patient package inserts for all US pharmaceutical products. Moreover, her insistence on public participation encouraged the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to open all future hearings to the public and to include patients' voices in the assessment of pharmaceutical products — something not yet the case in Canada.

As one of her friends wrote: "Her daring critiques, her courageous persistence in the face of major efforts to silence and discredit her, provide a model for many and gave us all strength to ensure that women's voices be heard and our concerns taken seriously."

In 1975, Seaman and 4 other women founded the National Women's Health Network, a women's health advocacy group based in Washington DC that continues to raise public consciousness and influence public policy on women's health issues and concerns, as well as highlight the need for women to become knowledgeable about their bodies and care options.

Seaman was also one of the first to question the medicalization of women's natural cycles, including the common practice of prescribing hormone therapy to "treat" menopause, raising concerns decades before the landmark Women's Health Initiative study (2002) demonstrated that long-term use of hormone therapy significantly increases the risk of breast cancer and stroke, among other harmful effects.

In her book, *The Greatest Experiment Ever Performed on Women* (2003), Seaman soundly demonstrates the failure of the FDA and the medical establishment to demand rigorous testing of hormone therapy before mass prescribing took place and castigates the pharmaceutical industry for putting profits above women's lives.

Throughout her life, Seaman was never too busy, too battle-weary or too distracted to provide caring support for others. There was never a request

for her insights, her review of some piece of work, her presence at some event that she rejected; her warmth and generosity of spirit and time are legendary.

Seaman's crusading for women's health and drug safety had a major impact beyond the borders of the United States and many in Canada also mourn her loss. We will miss this pioneer of the women's health movement. We are all in her debt. — Abby Lippman, Montréal, Que., Anne Rochon Ford, Toronto, Ont., and Kathleen O'Grady, Ottawa, Ont.

The authors have had a professional relationship with Ms. Seaman on various initiatives.

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News @ a glance

President-elect: Saskatoon, Sask., family physician Dr. Anne Doig has been selected president-elect of the Canadian Medical Association for 2009/10. Doig emerged as the victor on the fourth ballot of a 7 candidate contest (CMAJ 2008;178[5]:544). If ratified at this year's annual CMA conference, to be held in Montréal, Que., Doig will assume presidential duties in August 2009. She will be the fifth female president of the association.

Tuberculosis hot spots: Nearly 500 000 or a staggering 5% of all 9 million new tuberculosis cases diagnosed annually worldwide are of the multidrug-resistant variety, according to the World Health Organization's first update on the disease in 4 years. The percentages rise to 15%–22% in parts of China and former Soviet Union republics because of poverty, overcrowding, alcoholism and other social stresses. The study also found that extensively drug-resistant tuberculosis has now been detected in 45 countries.

Marijuana tug-of-war: The 124 000-strong American College of Physicians has called on the Bush administration to review marijuana's status as a Schedule 1 controlled substance so that its therapeutic use can be legitimized. Re-



Betty Lane, courtesy of Seven Stories Press

Science journalist and activist, Barbara Seaman twirls a cervical cap at a 1980 press conference about women's health.