

Lorraine Rothman, Women's Advocate, Dies at 75

By Jeremy Pearce Oct. 9, 2007

Lorraine Rothman, a leader of the feminist health movement in the 1970s who suggested that women could undergo or perform gynecological procedures without medical supervision, most controversially ending very early pregnancies with menstrual extraction, died Sept. 25 at her home in Fullerton, Calif. She was 75.

The cause was bladder cancer, her family said.

As the national women's movement coalesced in the 1960s and early '70s, Ms. Rothman joined a group that advocated self-help medical procedures, in part because of their concerns about the availability of legal abortions in hospitals.

Ms. Rothman, who was a schoolteacher, developed a device she called a menstrual extraction kit, which could be used for early abortions in the home, without the need of hospitalization. She attached two flexible tubes to a stopper in a glass jar. A syringe was then inserted into the mouth of one tube; a second tube could be snaked through a woman's cervix. Working the syringe created a vacuum that could remove the lining of the uterus and pass it into the jar.

The kit, which was patented by Ms. Rothman in 1974, could also be used to remove menstrual blood and shorten a woman's period. Gynecologists strongly questioned the device's safety and said that women using it risked infections and the possibility of a perforated uterus. The issue was equally controversial within the larger women's movement, where some were concerned about the potential for leaving behind part of an embryo, in a situation where emergency care might be unavailable.

Ms. Rothman defended the kit as a safer alternative to the suction procedure then in use in abortion clinics. She went on to teach vaginal self-examination and other procedures that could be performed by groups of women who were not professionals in a home setting.



Lorraine Rothman

Cynthia A. Pearson, executive director of the National Women's Health Network, an advocacy group based in Washington, said the kit represented a degree of medical autonomy for pregnant women in the years before 1973, when the Supreme Court's decision in *Roe v. Wade* overturned state prohibitions on abortion.

Ms. Rothman's device "totally turned around the lived experience of women in their reproductive years, giving them control and knowledge of their own bodies," Ms. Pearson said.

Ms. Rothman helped to found the Feminist Women's Health Center in Los Angeles and became executive director of a similar facility in Santa Ana, Calif. A colleague, Carol A. Downer, said the centers had initially taught self-help procedures and provided referrals for abortions in hospitals, and later functioned as abortion clinics.

Evelyn Lorraine Fleishman was born in San Francisco. She earned her undergraduate degree from California State University, Los Angeles. In 1988, she received a master's degree in health administration from Chapman University.

Ms. Rothman's husband, Alvin H. Rothman, died in 1995.

She is survived by two daughters, Andrea, of Sacramento, and Theresa Stenwall of Placentia, Calif.; two sons, Kenneth, of Pulaski, Tenn., and Murray, of Placentia; a sister, Sally Bloom of San Mateo, Calif.; and six grandchildren.

With Marcia Wexler, Ms. Rothman wrote a book, "Menopause Myths and Facts: What Every Woman Should Know About Hormone Replacement Therapy" (1999), in which she argued that hormones were being aggressively marketed and prescribed too broadly for women undergoing a natural change.