

Introducing:

Femme Fertile

Exploring Our Common Ground as Women

By Deborah Witwicki

Be what you want to be, do what you want to do...That was the refrain that proclaimed my rights as I was reaching womanhood in the 60s – era of free love. I had the freedom to pursue the career and man of my choice. I was a baby boomer. I had the choice to discard the burdens of fertility with a pill – something Momma couldn't do. I thought I knew things Momma hadn't dreamed of. But what I didn't and don't know about my fertile body and soul as a woman (which seems legion to me now) hurt me then and hurts me now in my menopausal years.

In naming this newsletter *Femme Fertile* (an earnest pun on *Femme Fatale*) it is our hope that we can give pause to such spurious notions of freedom and dismissal of what Momma knew.

The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines *Femme Fatale* as, "A woman of great seductive charm who leads men into compromising or dangerous situations." Unless she's made of stone, we can imagine those situations might be dangerous or fatal for her too. In fact, those of us who've been

around awhile know this to be true.

On the other hand, fertile is all about giving and sustaining the life of matter and being. The definition includes reference to: "initiating, sustaining, supporting reproduction, fecundity, seeds, fruit, abundance, fruitfulness; rich in material to sustain growth". The Indo-European root of the word fertility – **bher** – acknowledges that all of this life doesn't come without labour and pain. Along with "good fortune", **bher** connotes "endure and burden".

Our media and culture tends to emphasize our differences as women – old vs. young, homemaker vs. business professional, and so on. Are we to be divided and conquered? We believe there is an abundant common ground for us to explore together. We invite women of all ages – for our fertility exists continuously in both our bodies and souls – to share in our ongoing dialogue in *Femme Fertile*.

Deborah Witwicki is the editor of Femme Fertile

Please Keep in Touch

We welcome your questions, comments, story ideas and expressions of joy, pique or outrage.

By e-mail: editor@justisse.ca

By landmail: Editor, Femme Fertile

Justisse Healthworks for Women

10303 -65 Avenue

Edmonton, AB

T6H 1V1

A Fortright Women's Magazine for Maids, Mothers and Crones

Femme Fertile



A Passion for Justice

The Birth of Justisse Healthworks

by Geraldine Matus

Greetings . In this first edition of *Femme Fertile*, I thought it worthwhile to share with you some of the story of my life's work with reproductive health. My passion for women's health and fertility began early on. At age 23, I trained to become a natural family planning (NFP) teacher. At the same time, I was active in a woman's consciousness raising group and other organizations that advocated reproductive health freedom. I was deeply grateful for and inspired by what I learned through the NFP group, but I soon found myself at odds with its Roman Catholic proscriptions regarding sexual and contraceptive practices. So, I struck out on my own.

I developed a private fertility awareness practice and began a midwifery apprenticeship. I continued to take NFP training, including a program at a well-reputed institute for studies in human reproduction. As this institute was Catholic, I found it necessary to veil my feminist leanings, and remained veiled until the week before I was to write final exams. A "spy couple", ostensibly seeking abortion counseling, was sent by the program director to my clinic to investigate my politics. Thus was discovered my practices of teaching about condom use with fertility awareness, sexual practices alternative to

intercourse, abortion counseling, and teaching single "fornicating" women how to use fertility awareness. I was called before the director and his board for "reassessment". I knew that this meeting was to be fateful; I earnestly wanted to write the exams and earn my credentials.

In preparation for what was to come, I picked a Tarot card with the hopes of encountering some image to hold me during the trial. I drew the card of Justisse (old French for Justice), and realized I was facing an issue of justice. I was strengthened by the image.

I was dismissed from the program. No credentials for me. No hope for a fruitful collegial connection. I held on to my card of justice and pursued the creation of a women's sexual and reproductive health program. Justisse was born. Its birth cry insisted on the justice of individual women having personal authority to decide on the course of their reproductive and sexual health care. I continued to develop my skills as a reproductive health care practitioner and educator, and midwife (yes, sometimes still veiled). My recent completion of graduate work in counseling psychology, with an emphasis on depth psychology, has greatly furthered my understanding of the psyche-soma connection, which my clinical work has shown me to be central to reproductive health and well-being.

Advocacy for a woman's right to informed and independent choices around reproductive health care is gaining ground in mainstream North American culture.

"Its birth cry insisted on the justice of individual women having personal authority to decide on the course of their reproductive and sexual health care."

Yet, there still is misinformation, misrepresentation and commodification of the female body and violation of reproductive rights. Increasingly, I am moved to invite women to engage in dialogue – women whose bodies and souls bear the burden and privilege of carrying the archetype of creator, whose bodies are the carrier of the blood mysteries at all ages. Justisse Healthworks for Women and *Femme Fertile* invites young women to reach out to understand their bodies and souls and the choices ahead of them. We invite mature women to continue to explore their generative capacity and to gather around them young women with whom to share their wisdom – Woman to Woman.

Geraldine Matus is the Director of Justisse Healthworks for Woman

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Featured in This Issue:

- 1** **Introducing *Femme Fertile***
Exploring Our Common Ground
- 2** **A Passion for Justice**
The Birth of Justisse Healthworks *for Women*
- 3** **Table of Contents**
- 4** **The Menstrual Cycle:
Nuisance or Vital Sign**
- 5** **Did You Know?**
- 6** **Woman to Woman**
Reproductive Health Care Practitioners
Answer Your Questions
- 7** **Alberta Colleagues Chosen by
The Society for Menstrual Cycle
Research**
- 8** **Justisse Healthworks
for Women
Publications**

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A publication of
Justisse
Healthworks
for Women
Geraldine
Matus,
Director

Deborah
Witwicki,
Editor

Healthworks
Building #210
10303 - 65
Avenue
Edmonton, AB
T6H 1V1

phone
780.420.0877
tollfree
1.866.JUSTISSE
(587.8477)





The Menstrual Cycle: Nuisance or Vital Sign?

By Laura
Wershler

In an April 2004 *Calgary Herald* article (*Making your period a full stop*), Dr. Brian Hauck, the Calgary Health Region's chief of gynaecology, is quoted as saying, "there is no physiological reason to have a period." His voice echoed what is becoming a full-scale onslaught of medical opinion and pharmaceutical marketing advocating menstrual suppression.

I beg to differ. Menstrual suppression may be a reasonable treatment choice for women with severe endometriosis, killer period migraines, polycystic ovary syndrome or a predetermined risk for ovarian cancer. But for the rest of us?

Menstrual suppression has been available for years through off-label use of regular birth control pills. Depo-Provera, a shot taken four times a year to prevent pregnancy, reduces menstrual flow to nothing. And now, a new oral contraceptive product, pending Health Canada approval, will give women just four "periods" a year — hence the catchy brand name Seasonale.

It is ludicrous for medical professionals (and drug companies poised to make millions) to attest menstruation serves no good purpose other than pregnancy. One of the reasons they get away with it is that too little research has been done on why women menstruate. In her book *NoMore Periods?*, Dr. Susan Rako discusses the growing body of research that indicates the cyclic secretion of hormones

during a normal fertile menstrual cycle plays a significant role in many aspects of female health. She presents compelling evidence to support that "birth control pills throw a hormonal monkey wrench into the normal, intricate interplay of hormones and their effects not only on reproduction, but also on our blood vessels, our heart, our bones, our immune system and our brain."

It is essential to know that women do not have real periods or "regulated cycles" when they take birth control pills (BCPs). They experience hormone withdrawal bleeding. Artificial hormones in BCPs disrupt the normal menstrual ebb and flow of hormonal activity that distinguishes a fertile menstrual cycle. We accept this disruption, and the many side effects that can accompany it, for the major benefit of pregnancy prevention. Now, some women are choosing the "benefit" of eliminating the "nuisance" of menstruation, often without full information about the possible repercussions.

I'm committed to reproductive choice. I've spent the past 20 years defending it. But I am first and foremost an advocate for sexual and reproductive health and I believe all women deserve full disclosure to make personal decisions about how to protect, maintain and manage our fertility.

Research strongly suggests that the depletion of excess iron through menstruation protects us from heart disease. Normal periods also provide a natural

mechanism to lower blood pressure. Other research indicates cyclic hormonal variations that occur during normal fertile menstrual cycles are essential for building strong bones. Depo-Provera, a contraceptive more and more readily prescribed to adolescents, is particularly implicated as detrimental to bone health.

Much more research on the benefits of menstruation to women's health must be done and it must be heartily supported. What are the health implications of both normal and disordered cycles to our hearts, bones, brains, immune systems, and sexual response — all the parts that make up the whole woman? I want to know.

Medical science has not earned the right to state that, unless a woman wants to get pregnant, there is no reason to have real periods. The menstrual cycle is not a nuisance, a danger or an anachronism. It is a partially solved mystery with many secrets regarding our overall well-being yet to be revealed.

Laura Wershler is a sexual and reproductive health advocate and the executive director of Planned Parenthood Alberta.

For more information, visit the website for The Society of Menstrual Cycle Research at www.pop.psu.edu/smcr.

Did You Know?

What Every Woman Needs to Know About Health Treatments



Pharmaceutical companies spend \$40,000 a year **per physician** in Alberta to promote their products.

All prescription drugs used for infertility treatment are used without specific approval either by the Canadian Health Protection Branch (HPA) or the USA Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for that application. (This is called “off-label use”.)

The Depo-Provera shot biologically launches a woman into premature menopause.

Dr. Charles Dodd, the doctor who developed diethylstilbestrol, the first synthetic estrogen, for years vigorously appealed to have it taken off the market because of his realization of its perilous side effects. *The Greatest Experiment Ever Performed on Women* by Barbara Seaman.

“Progesterone for calmness and relaxation...progesterone stimulates GABA the major inhibitory neurotransmitter in the nervous system, giving rise to an increased feeling of relaxation.”

Uzzi Reiss *Natural Hormone Balance* p. 228. This is why bio-identical progesterone supplementation during the post-ovulatory phase of the menstrual cycle is so helpful in calming premenstrual tension. As well progesterone has myriad health benefits for women. See the official website of Dr. John Lee, the pre-eminent expert on bio-identical progesterone replacement therapies:

<http://www.johnleemd.com/>

“A woman almost has a better chance of being hit by a snowmobile after forty than she does of getting pregnant naturally or unnaturally.” *Sex, Lies, and Menopause* by T.S. Wiley.

Must We Fear Adolescent Sexuality?

An excerpt from Medscape General Medicine

How is it that two countries, the United States and The Netherlands, similar in terms of wealth, education, and reproductive technologies, have had the highest and lowest rates of teen pregnancy, respectively, in the Western world? The answer is surely illuminated through a sociological inquiry into the construction of adolescence and sexuality within the white, moderately religious or secular middle class of the two countries – the sector of the population that in

both countries has a dominant influence on healthcare, education, politics, and the media. In this first of a series of articles for Medscape General Medicine, Dr. Amy Schalet, PhD, discusses the results of her research. Ultimately, the results suggest a course of action for the American healthcare profession as it regards adolescent healthcare. We invite and encourage you to comment. Send email to usnyder@webmd.net.

Must We Fear Adolescent Sexuality?
<http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/494933?src=mp>

Woman to Woman

Reproductive Health Care Practitioners

Answer Your Questions

Whose Womb is it Anyway?

A recent New York Times article announced U.S. President George W. Bush's new "faith-based" health plan offered to federal employees. The plan excludes payment for contraceptives, abortion, sterilization and artificial insemination. Many are concerned that this is a trend in proscribed health care that may grow. I've also heard that some doctors and pharmacists are refusing to provide birth control prescriptions. It alarms me that women's essential choices can be usurped in this way.

Alarmed in Alberta

Dear Alarmed,

I share your outrage about the violation of reproductive freedom that is inherent in these policies. However, there is a part of me that is secretly glad that birth control pills (BCPs) are being refused because of the serious health concerns for women linked to the use of synthetic estrogens and progestins for birth control as well as infertility and menopausal treatments. What bothers me more than the refusal to provide BCP prescriptions, is the general lack of initiatives to teach women how to understand their reproductive cycle in a way that empowers them to make fully informed choices.



It has been my experience, as a fertility awareness and reproductive health educator for the past 25 years, that any woman who learns how to chart her menstrual cycles and is supported in the interpretation of those cycles is always more empowered reproductively, and, in general, has little need for doctors or pharmacists to tell them what they can or cannot do with their reproductive system. Now **that** is freedom!

It is my personal hope that no woman ever be put on synthetic hormones and that all women be given the information they need to regulate their fertility through self-knowledge. It is possible and viable as I have witnessed for many years. It is now mostly a matter of convincing health care providers to assist women in getting that knowledge and supporting them in their use of it.

A Trying Exam

I went to the gynaecologist yesterday. This doctor did not know anything about fertility awareness. I felt that I was less than eloquent in trying to explain what it was, but I did my best. He said that observing cervical mucus is too difficult and that I shouldn't bother and he also didn't even know that the cervix changes position during the woman's cycle. (During the examination he said, "Your cervix IS tilted!"). He also told me that the least safe time to have intercourse is BEFORE YOU BLEED and it's somewhat safer AFTER you bleed. What I learned in my study of fertility awareness is the exact opposite!

Perplexed

Dear Perplexed,

I understand how you might be confused. Medical doctors in all specialties receive no formal training in fertility awareness. Few of the many dozens of university and college medical and health texts I have reviewed contain comprehensive information on fertility awareness, and those that do represent it poorly. So, it is understandable that first, your gynaecologist would say he knows nothing about fertility awareness and second, that he would provide you with misleading information out of his own lack of knowledge. This is unfortunate. However,

it is fortunate that you invoked your own wisdom in asking a wise woman for help.

What you learned in your study of fertility awareness is exactly right. The post-ovulatory phase of the menstrual cycle is infertile. This phase is determined once you have confidently identified that your fertile phase, cervical mucus and ovulation, have passed. After bleeding (menstruation) is the phase that eventually leads up to the presence of cervical mucus, which is fertile because it allows the sperm to survive until ovulation day. This phase can be variable from cycle to cycle and woman to woman, thus the necessity for careful observation of menstrual cycle events. You may review this in the Justisse on-line User's Guidebook <http://www.justisse.ca/ebook/ebook.html> . Make some time to spend with a Justisse HRHP practitioner to answer your questions. Confidence and success in using fertility awareness have been proven to increase with one-on one-contact with a practitioner.

May you continue to trust your own body's wisdom.

Just Ask Us

If you have questions you would like to ask a Holistic Reproductive Health Practitioner, please contact us:

**Woman to Woman
Justisse Healthworks
for Women
Healthworks Building
#210, 10303 – 65 Avenue
Edmonton, AB
Canada T6H 1V1
(780) 420.0877
1.866.Justisse (587.8477)
www.justisse.ca
info@justisse.ca**

Alberta Colleagues Chosen by Menstrual Research Society

Justisse Healthworks *for Women* Director Geraldine Matus and Planned Parenthood Executive Director Laura Wershler have been selected to present to the biennial conference of **The Society for Menstrual Cycle Research (SMCR)** this coming June in Boulder, Colorado.

“The invitation to be part of an important international event in the field of menstrual cycle study is a great honor and opportunity,” says Ms. Matus. “Laura and I were pleased that our work in women’s reproductive health was recognized at this level.”

As introduced on its website (www.pop.psu.edu): “The Society for Menstrual Cycle Research, a non profit organization, was founded in 1977 by a multidisciplinary group of women who were pioneers in understanding the centrality of menstrual cycle research to women’s health. We are an interdisciplinary group of researchers, health care providers, policy makers and students who share an interest in women’s lives and health needs as they are related to the menstrual cycle.”

The mission of SMCR is to “be the source of guidance, expertise, and ethical considerations for researchers, practitioners, policy makers and funding resources interested in the menstrual cycle.”

Ms. Wershler and Ms. Matus will be presenting their abstract: *Recovering the Blood Mysteries: Psycho-Physiological Rationale for an Interactive and Affirming Reconnection to the Menstrual Cycle through Fertility Awareness & Holistic Reproductive Health Care.*

Given the controversy surrounding the menstrual cycle and the prevailing trend to minimize its importance in the interests of pharmaceutical profits and convenience (see *The Menstrual Cycle: Nuisance or Vital Sign* on page 4), Ms. Wershler and Ms. Matus are committed to opportunities to expand awareness and contribute to the research in this field.



Around Every Wise Woman are Many Other Wise Women

For you and the other women in your circle of friends and family. Justisse Healthworks for Women offers these services:

- **Counseling therapy**
- **Fertility awareness education**
- **Contraceptive counseling**
- **Sexual and reproductive wellness education and counseling**
- **Perimenopause and menopause consultation and care**
- **Holistic Reproductive Health Practitioner training**

Visit us online at www.justisse.ca or call today to set up your personal consultation (780) 420.0877 or 1.866.Justisse (587.8477)

**Justisse
Healthworks
for Women**

**Healthworks Building
#210, 10303 - 65 Avenue
Edmonton, AB T6H 1V1
Canada**

Attending Women -- body and soul -- from first menstruation to beyond menopause

Holistic Health Publications Justisse Healthworks for Women

Contact Justisse Healthworks for Women to receive free copies of the following brochures:

Can't, Won't, Don't Want to Take the Pill...

Natural Birth Control

Therapeutic Counseling

You Want to Have a Baby

Fertility Management Care

Perimenopausal and Menopausal Care

Serve Women's Health and Well Being

Join our Community of Holistic Reproductive Health Practitioners

email: info@justisse.ca

web: www.justisse.ca

phone: 780.420.0877

tollfree: 1.866.JUSTISSE

(587.8477)

mail: Justisse Healthworks
for Women

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T6H 1V1

