

## Evelyn Lorraine Rothman (1932-2007)

Evelyn Lorraine Rothman advocated for women's reproductive rights and invented at-home kits for women's health concerns in the late twentieth century in Los Angeles, California. Rothman provided women in the Los Angeles area with the means to perform self-examinations, pregnancy tests, and abortions on their own without assistance from a medical professional. Along with Carol Downer, Rothman cofounded the Federation of Feminist Health Centers in Los Angeles, California, and spent her career educating women on reproductive health. She also invented the Del-Em Kit, a menstrual extraction device that allowed women to perform very early abortions on their own and at home. Rothman's activism educated women on female anatomy, provided an at-home option for early abortion before abortion became legal, and promoted women's reproductive rights in the 1970s.

Rothman was born Evelyn Lorraine Fleishman on 25 January 1932 in San Francisco, California. Both her parents had immigrated to the United States in 1921 from Ukraine and they met and married in San Francisco. Rothman was born into a traditional Orthodox Jewish family and attended Hebrew school during her younger years. According to Rothman, throughout her childhood she observed the unequal treatment of women in her religion, where men were favored because they would pass on the family name. At the age of twelve, Rothman and her family moved to Los Angeles, California, where she attended John Burroughs Junior High School and worked with her father in his furniture upholstery shop. According to Rothman, after she hit puberty and developed breasts, her father refused to let her continue working for him and their relationship suffered.

During her adolescent years, Rothman's family often avoided the topic of women's health and sexuality. In an interview, Rothman explained that her mother slapped her when she began menstruating at age twelve, because it was a Jewish tradition and menstruation was considered shameful. Rothman's mother required her to wear a bra and did not allow Rothman to wear pants or participate in physical activities after beginning her menstrual period. Rothman claimed she educated herself about her own health and sexuality by reading medical books.

After graduating from high school, Rothman attended Los Angeles City College in Los Angeles, California, while working full time at a clothing store. She later transferred to California State University in Los Angeles, California, where she graduated with a bachelor's degree and a teaching credential in 1954.

Against the wishes of her parents and older sister, Rothman married Al Rothman in the summer of 1954 after meeting him at a carnival event at her family's temple. Following their marriage, Rothman and her husband moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where her husband completed his graduate education and Rothman began substitute teaching at elementary schools. After having their first child in 1956, the family relocated several times before settling in Fullerton, California, in 1964. After moving to California, Rothman spent the majority of her time raising her children, Theresa, Andrea, Murray, and Kenneth. According to Rothman, during those years she became dissatisfied with her life and marriage.

In 1968, Rothman became involved with the local chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in Orange County, California, a feminist organization that advocated for legal, political, and social change to end sexism and promote gender equality. In 1970, Rothman attended a meeting at California State University, Fullerton in Fullerton, California, titled "Women's Liberation," which she credits to increasing her interest in reproductive rights. During the meeting, young women discussed issues pertaining to women's health and reproductive education that concerned them. In April 1971, Rothman met Carol Downer, a reproductive rights advocate, at a feminist self-help

clinic event Downer had arranged to educate women about female anatomy and reproductive health. After the meeting, Rothman and Downer began working together to promote women's reproductive knowledge.

Rothman began her activism during the early 1970's when criminal law prohibited abortion in the US. Those wishing to abort a pregnancy needed to travel out of the country or risk paying a doctor to perform an illegal abortion, which was often dangerous. Under some rare circumstances, abortions were permitted to preserve the pregnant woman's life. However, untrained individuals performed most abortions in the US in unsanitary conditions that often resulted in the pregnant woman contracting potentially fatal infections after the procedure. In the summer of 1971, Rothman and Downer traveled to Seattle, Washington, where a doctor trained them to perform suction dilation and curettage abortions. When physicians perform a dilation and curettage abortions or D&C abortions, they use medications or instruments to open or dilate the cervix. They then use an instrument called a curette to remove the fetus and some uterine tissue.

That same year, in 1971, Rothman and Downer founded the Los Angeles Feminist Women's Health Center in Los Angeles. The employees of the health center, located on Crenshaw Boulevard, educated women on how to perform cervical self-examinations and pregnancy tests without the aid of a doctor. Cervical examinations are important for identifying various reproductive problems, including sexually transmitted infections and cancers. Rothman and Downer trained themselves and others in self-examinations using magazines from Canada that discussed home examinations and other issues involving birth control and pregnancy. Reading materials with that information were not readily available in the US at that time.

In 1971, Rothman invented a menstrual extraction kit with objects she found in grocery and hardware stores, aquarium shops, and her husband's biology lab. The menstrual extraction kit allowed women to remove their own uterine lining and menstrual blood using vacuum suction created by a syringe and tubing passed through the cervix. To make the menstrual extraction kit, Rothman attached two flexible tubes to the stopper of a glass jar. She inserted a syringe into the opening of one of the tubes and users of the device inserted the other tube into their cervix. The vacuum created by pulling back the syringe plunger caused the lining of the uterus to pass through the jar, effectively removing the uterine lining and menstrual blood. Women could use the device to evacuate the shedding uterine lining and blood during menstruation, shortening their menstrual periods. Rothman advertised her device as a means to shorten menstruation, and called the device the Del-Em kit.

However, women could also use the device to abort pregnancies in their early stages. When Rothman created her kit, abortions were illegal, and therefore the kit could not be advertised as a means to produce an abortion. Her device allowed women to end early pregnancies at home and without the assistance of a trained medical professional. Rothman's kit had a two-way bypass valve that prevented air from entering the uterus, a safety measure that had not been incorporated in similar syringe abortion techniques used in clinics at the time.

Rothman and Downer promoted the Del-Em kit and attempted to display the device in 1971 at a National Organization for Women's conference in Santa Monica, California. However, the Organization denied them exhibition space. Despite that setback, Rothman and Downer set up a makeshift exhibit in their hotel room near the conference and many women visited to learn about menstrual extraction and self-examination. Although doctors questioned the safety of the kit and its potential for causing infection or uterine damage, Rothman patented the Del-Em kit in 1974. Throughout her career, Rothman defended the Del-Em as a safer alternative to the suction abortion techniques used in abortion clinics at the time. According to Rothman, the kit served as a means of medical autonomy for women before abortion became legal in the US.

After inventing the Del-Em kit, Rothman continued to educate women about birth control, pregnancy, their bodies, and the processes occurring within them through her Feminist Women's Health Center clinic in Los Angeles. She also toured around the country, through twenty-three cities, demonstrating how to use her menstrual extraction kit and perform various self-examinations. According to Rothman, she believed that women should be able to perform simple gynecological procedures and examinations themselves, without any doctor supervision. She continued to manage

the clinic in Los Angeles and later became the executive director of a similar clinic in Santa Ana, California. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Rothman worked fifty-five to sixty hours a week in both Los Angeles and Santa Ana. While working so many hours at the Federation, Rothman lived in an apartment in Los Angeles during the week and visited her husband and children in Fullerton on the weekends. During that time, Rothman's husband cared for their children and supported Rothman's education outreach activities.

For several years in the 1980s, Rothman continued to work in women's health, writing pamphlets and educational books for the Federation. According to Rothman, her and Downer's work inspired groups across the country, motivating them to open similar abortion and women's health clinics. After the closing of the Federation of Feminist Health Centers in the mid-1980s, Rothman continued to write and educate women in small consciousness-raising groups on reproductive rights and women's health issues.

In 1988, Rothman obtained a master's degree in health administration from Chapman University in Orange, California. In 1989, the Spanish government invited Rothman to speak in Seville, Spain, at a reproductive health conference. Along with feminist Marcia Wexler, Rothman coauthored the book *Menopause Myths and Facts: What Every Woman Should Know About Hormone Replacement Therapy* in 1999. The book proposed that hormones were being unnecessarily marketed and prescribed too readily for women undergoing what Rothman described as the natural process of menopause. On 25 September 2007, Rothman died at her home in Fullerton, California, after being diagnosed with bladder cancer.

## Sources

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