

Barbara Seaman (1935–2008)

Barbara Seaman was a writer, investigator, and advocate for female healthcare rights during the twentieth century in the United States. Seaman's work addressed the gendered prejudice she observed in the US healthcare system and argued that women of the 1960s lacked the proper tools to make informed decisions about pregnancy care, breastfeeding, childbirth, and contraception. Seaman wrote the book *The Doctor's Case Against the Pill* in 1969 to expose the dangers in prescribing and consuming high doses of estrogen in the form of birth control. Seaman's objective was to expose what she described as pharmaceutical companies' drive for profit over safety. Her reporting helped provide a voice to many women who lacked proper health information and helped improve the standard of healthcare that women received in the US. Through her publications and activism, Seaman brought women's healthcare to the public's attention and contributed to the feminist and women's healthcare movements of the twentieth century.

Seaman was born as Barbara Ann Rosner on 11 September 1935 to Sophie Kimels and Henry Rosner in New York, New York. Her father was an assistant commissioner of social services and a journalist. Her mother was a high school English teacher as well as a writer and an artist. According to historian Caroline Richmond, Seaman's parents met at a picnic meeting for a young socialist organization and honeymooned in Russia, which grew their interest in Stalinist totalitarianism, a communist ideology of the twentieth century. During the 1930s, Russian statesman Joseph Stalin was creating a social climate in the Soviet Union that would later be described as communism. Seaman grew up in progressive social circles, and in 1956 she graduated from Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio. After graduation, Seaman began writing and editing for local women's publications. Seaman met Peter Marks in Ohio and they married in 1954 when she was nineteen years old. Their marriage was later annulled, and in 1957 Seaman married Gideon Seaman. Together, they had three children, Noah, Elana, and Shira.

In 1960, when Seaman was 25, her aunt died of uterine cancer and Seaman herself claimed that during that period she learned of the dangers of estrogen, a female sex hormone. The doctors who treated her aunt advised Seaman and her female relatives never to take Premarin, an estrogen-containing medication used to treat the symptoms of menopause, or cessation of menstruation. Seaman stated that she was horrified that her aunt's physician had failed to disclose the risks of the medication to her, and thus failed to let her aunt make her own informed decision on whether to take it or not. Seaman stated that after her aunt's death, she grew to be passionate about informed consent, or patient permission given to the doctor to begin or continue treatment while being aware of the potential consequences. This event prompted Seaman to write several articles on the effects of estrogen on breastfeeding and natural childbirth.

In the mid 1960s, Seaman served as a columnist and contributing editor for publications including *Brides*, *Ms. Magazine*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Family Circle*. In 1968, she received a Sloan-Rockefeller Science Writing Fellowship from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York City, New York, to continue writing about women's issues for those publications. During her career as a writer, Seaman joined the Society of Magazine Writers and served on the board for the National Organization for Women, or NOW. She also served as vice president of the New York City Medical Center and co-founded the New York Women's Forum, a multidiscipline professional network of female leaders in New York. While working for *Ladies Home Journal*, Seaman received letters from women who discussed their experience with blood clots, heart issues, depression, and other consequences of taking birth control. The first legal birth control pill was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration, or FDA, for married couples in 1960 and was legalized for all women in the US in 1965. During the 1960s and 1970s, pharmaceutical companies created various

birth control pills and not much was known about the effects of high doses of estrogen used in the first generation birth control pills. After learning of women who had become sick after taking birth control with high doses of estrogen, Seaman wrote her first women's health book.

In 1969, Seaman published *The Doctor's Case Against the Pill*. In that book, Seaman argued that consuming estrogen in large amounts by taking birth control pills could pose serious and dangerous threats to a woman's body. Although the pill had been heavily researched before being made legal for married couples in 1965, Seaman claimed that there was still much that patients did not know about the consequences of birth control pills. The first birth control pills during the 1960s contained high doses of estrogen, which Seaman argued had serious and potentially fatal health consequences when consumed in large doses. Seaman contested that during the 1960s male doctors failed to inform women of the risks of the birth control pill, including heart attacks, blood clots, cancer, and stroke. Researchers had known since the 1930s that estrogen contributed to cancer development in the uterus, and Seaman expressed concern that pharmaceutical companies and physicians continued to produce and prescribe birth control pills while knowing the potential consequences. Seaman claimed that, instead, male physicians routinely blamed women's health issues on the patient and claimed the disease was created by their mind. During the 1960s, many women had no other options but to consult their male doctors, who would often discourage women from asking too many questions about their reproductive wellness. Seaman sought to educate women on what she stated being a significant medical injustice to women.

According to Seaman, multiple pharmaceutical companies acted to prevent the publishing of her book *The Doctor's Case Against the Pill*, which caused publication delays. During the late 1960s, some of Seaman's fellow science writers documented her efforts and told her story, gaining the attention of Gaylord Nelson, a Wisconsin senator who was preparing to hold Senate hearings on the dangers of birth control in Washington, DC. Seaman's book became the basis for the hearings. Her writing influenced women's leaders such as Alice Wolfson in displays of feminist disobedience during the hearings. Wolfson led the women's liberation movement of DC, which continuously interrupted hearings and demanded explanation as to why ten million women were being treated like guinea pigs for birth control and why there was no birth control alternative for men. As a direct result of Seaman's book, the hearings, and the associated public outcry, in June of 1970 birth control pills were newly required to have a printed FDA warning label that presented the risks of taking the pill, specifically risks that involved clotting disorders. According to a historian Margalit Fox, Seaman's book inspired women across America to not feel intimidated by their predominantly male doctors and to take responsibility of their own healthcare.

According to Cindy Pearson, the executive director of the National Women's Health Network, more women were inspired to participate in the feminist movement that was building throughout the 1960s in the US as result of the Senate hearings and Seaman's book. Throughout the 1960s into the 1970s, many women's groups came together to form a strong women's liberation movement, often referred to as second wave feminism. That movement discussed issues involving sexuality, women's health issues and rights to the forefront of national conversation. As exemplified in her written works, Seaman was a firm believer that the US health system made being a woman a disease and she argued that menopause and pregnancy were all treated as diseases in western medicine. However, there was substantial evidence to the safety and some benefits of lower estrogen birth control pills that were used in the twentieth century.

Seaman made many claims about the activity of the pharmaceutical companies that were producing birth control pills throughout the late 1960s and into the 1970s. According to historian Adam Bernstein, Seaman incorporated polemical language and related pharmaceutical companies distributing birth control pills to Nazi medical experiments, which sometimes distracted reviewers from her central motive when reporting on pharmaceutical companies or the FDA about her research on what was a dangerous dose of estrogen in birth control pills. Seaman justified her tone by claiming she had evidence that the drug industry had not made public the negative clinical studies on some of their drugs. Seaman also claimed that she saw transcripts from meetings between birth control manufacturers and clinical researchers that showed that they knew of the possibility of fatal complications from the pill and had made jokes about women's tight girdles causing blood clots during those meetings. Seaman's written work influenced the generation of lower dose estrogen birth

control pills that were less harmful. Her activism is credited by reporter Valerie Nelson as the launching point of the modern feminist health movement.

Seaman published several other books during her career. In 1972, she published the book *Free and Female: The Sex Life of The Contemporary Woman*, which the Library Of Congress credited as raising sexism in healthcare to a worldwide issue. In 1974, Seaman published *The Crisis in Sex Hormones*, which she co-authored with her husband, Gideon Seaman. With that book, Seaman helped mobilize the US Secretary of Health and Human Services to form a government task force to tend to issues caused by the medication DES, or diethylstilbestrol, which caused cancer in the children of women who took it to prevent miscarriages. Seaman served on the task force as well. In response to her first three books, *The New York Times* credited Seaman with instigating a revolution and fostering willingness among the female community to take healthcare into their own hands.

In 1975, Seaman cofounded the National Women's Health Network in Washington, DC, along with Alice Wolfson, Mary Howell, Phyllis Chesler, and Belita Cowan, to provide a voice for women's health justice. The organization also provided health information to women throughout the US and created a political voice on the gender disparity in women's health and the risks of estrogen hormone therapies for women. Hormone treatments that were offered to women at the time included birth control pills, birth control patches, estrogen replacement therapy during menopause, and other synthetic estrogen substitutes. Seaman's organization provided information about medical alternatives to hormones and also advocated to eliminate quotas for the number of women allowed acceptance into medical schools each year. Similarly, Seaman advocated with other feminist health organizations for the use of the cervical cap, which was a form contraception that was placed on the cervix, the opening at the base of the uterus, instead of hormone birth control. In 1975, Seaman also spoke at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and demanded that more women be admitted into medical school and specifically the field of gynecology, or the medical specialty pertaining to women's reproductive organs.

In the 1980s, Seaman's life and career began to shift focus. In 1978, Seaman and her husband separated and eventually divorced, and in 1982 Seaman married Milton Forman. During the 1980s, Seaman was blacklisted by women's magazines when the pharmaceutical companies refused to advertise their products in magazines that published Seaman's work. Because of that, she began focusing on biographical writing and in 1987 published *Lovely Me, The Life of Jacqueline Susann*, which was made into a TV movie starring Michele Lee. During her marriage with Forman, Seaman claimed that her husband had punched her in the face and in 1988 he was arrested and charged with assault. In the 1990s, Seaman spoke out publicly on personal experiences with domestic violence to raise awareness about that issue.

Seaman served as a Judge of the Project Censored Awards from 1997 until her death in 2008 in New York City, New York. In year 2000, she was named an honoree in the dedication of the US Postal Service's Women's Rights Movement stamp. In 1999, she returned to non-biographical writing with her book *For Women Only!*, which she co-wrote with fitness specialist Gary Null. Her book *The Greatest Experiment Ever Performed on Women: Exploding the Estrogen Myth* was published in 2003. In the book, Seaman discussed her beliefs in the alternative motives of pharmaceutical companies and medicine's reckless prescription of estrogen to many women. The book contained updated medical and scientific research. In a review of the book, Liza Mundy described Seaman as having conspiracy theories and claimed that Seaman alluded that drug companies were criminals actively working against the interests of their patients.

Seaman continued to work as an advocate into the twenty-first century, serving on several boards and initiatives including the educational board, women promoting non-profit, and Feminist Press. She also made various radio and television appearances. On 27 February 2008, Seaman died of lung cancer in her home in New York City at the age of seventy-two.

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