

Offering help whenever it's needed

By IRENE MOCK

Two women are sitting in a room, one typing, the other pursuing books on women's health problems, legal problems and sexuality.

A woman in her mid 20s (we'll call her Jane) walks in and asks for information on contraception. Together Jane and the counsellor explore this. Over the next 30 minutes the conversation broadens.

Soon, Jane is not only talking about contraception, but the problems of job and family that intimately concern her life.

"We often find that specific information is only part of the counselling conversation," says Cally Wozny, one of three workers at the Women's Centre

at 490 Baker St., open Monday — Friday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

The goal of the Centre is to give women a clearer idea of their alternatives to the traditionally mapped-out "women's role." Activities such as health education classes, legal clinics, "rap sessions," and a women's literature course offer women a chance to determine their own sets of values and assume responsibility for the direction of their lives.

Over the past two and a half years, the Centre has been active in serving women with legal problems (divorce, child custody, finances), job finding, job discrimination, welfare, health problems, and finding apartments. Every woman who

goes there is accepted as equal and welcomed because she is a woman.

The Centre recently obtained a grant of \$9,400 from the Secretary of State Women's Year Program, enabling it to continue operation.

A Childbirth Education Centre, given by Camille Bush, is scheduled for Saturdays all day. Ms. Bush is a trained paramedic who worked in the Vancouver Women's Health Collective and Childbirth Education Center in Vancouver.

"My goal is to discuss with women the physiological and emotional aspects of birth, as well as to prepare the husband and wife to work together during the birth process," says Camille.

She will be teaching pre-natal exercises and nutrition during pregnancy, as well as giving post-natal support. She will also work full-time as health counsellor at the Centre.

"Through open discussion on any health problems women encounter," explains Camille, "we can learn which questions to best ask our doctors."

Because some women are just starting to formulate ideas of what they need to live more fully, the Centre has formed a group to meet one night a week to discuss women's needs in the Nelson area. This will be closely-knit group and its direction will be determined by the interests of the women in it.

Some suggestions already made by its members include learning about women's legal problems, family problems, relaxation and sensitivity exercises, and avoiding the isolation women experience inside their homes, jobs, and the community.

"We want to provide a Centre where a woman can find friendly support as well as information and referral; a place where she will not be afraid of receiving judgment or criticism for her situation," says Diane Luthmers, the third full-time worker at the Centre.

"For example, a woman who is separating from her husband faces a disruptive change in her social circle. We are attentive to her feelings at this time, many of us having shared similar experiences."

The Centre's counsellors work according to their individual interests and experiences. Each counsellor has become familiar with certain problems they've individually encountered and have learned to find their own solutions.

"We each become "specialists" in understanding our own problems—discriminatory treatment under law, medicine, and employment. We can help each other by sharing our varied personal solutions," says Cally.

Women often come into the Centre with suspicions that they have been discriminated against when applying for a job. For example, two women complained that they had applied for jobs at Cominco but were told there were no shower facilities. "Besides, what would happen

if a lot of women were to work at Cominco?", and if she had been a man, she would have been hired.

The Centre tries to familiarize women with the laws and their rights. Often it helps them write letters to the Human Rights Commission in Victoria.

Many women who have used the Centre don't realize discrimination is unlawful and that they can do something about it. Some women work at untraditional women's jobs such as operating saws at lumber

mills. The Centre's counsellors feel it's important women realize the variety of jobs available to get them into the labor force.

The Centre is a participating member of the SPARC Health Committee which makes recommendations for improving health facilities. The Centre has been working for a year with the Selkirk Health Unit to improve existing venereal disease in Nelson. The Centre also is a member of the B.C. Federation of Women.



Cally Wozny explains some of work of the Centre.



Women's Centre staff member Diane Luthmers talks with Sena Gates during a typical afternoon at the Centre. Staff photos by Peggy Pawelko