

Women's health is an Ovarian Connection

by Sharon Twiss

"Some women get really angry when they find out how their bodies work," says Louise Smith, an educator and women's health advocate. "They're upset because they're finding out now, in their twenties and thirties, when they say should've been taught this at school."

Six years ago, Louise started *Ovarian Connection* and got in the business of teaching women's physiology in plain language. "There's a lot of health information out there that discusses women's bodies from the point of view that something's wrong with them. Information that focuses on pathology, like cancer, or infertility, or outrageous PMS symptoms. Where's the information about our normal responses?"

The creation of *Ovarian Connection* was a good blend of Louise's Master's degree in Physiology from Simon Fraser University, and her feminist politics. Physiology of the Childbearing Year was the first class she developed, which, in eight weekly sessions, explains how a woman's body adapts to pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, and the postpartum. It was initially offered to aspiring midwives to fill the gap in anatomy & physiology courses being offered in the Lower Mainland.

"Anatomy & Physiology courses are traditionally presented from the point of view of the male body," explains Louise. "Reproductive physiology is usually the last section, and most of the time it gets short shrift at the end of the semester when some

topics inevitably get cut." So aspiring midwives were missing out on the very topic which led them to the course in the first place, and left them still wanting the information.

"I was keen to fill the gap," says Louise, "and to present it in a non-threatening way. Traditional science courses require a lot of memorization that gets fed back to the instructor. I wanted to create classes where the women could grab hold of the content, make it their own, where they can get excited about the information and gain a deep enough understanding that they can further their studies with greater confidence."

It's hormones, particularly estrogen and progesterone, that have a significant effect on women. Most of these hormones are produced in women's ovaries, hence the name, *Ovarian Connection*. Along with Physiology for the Childbearing Year, Louise also offers workshops on Exercise in Pregnancy, Amazing Breasts, Body Fat Facts for Women, Premenstrual Symptoms, Menopause, and Perimenopause: Leading Up to Menopause. She offers her courses through the Continuing Education Departments at Douglas, Langara, and Vancouver Community Colleges. Louise also offers her courses outside of the Lower Mainland through colleges, or through grassroots organizing.

Louise uses a lot of humour in her classes, and strives to make the content relevant to women's lives. The props she uses include a plastic pear

from Zellers as a uterus, almonds for ovaries, and pipe cleaners to connect them. "Fallopia was a man, so the trend is to call them uterine or ovarian tubes. That's what the pipe cleaners are," she explains. A felt board she borrowed from her kids helps her demonstrate the changing hormone levels women experience throughout the menstrual cycle.

She's also made innovations from traditional courses in the assignments students are asked to complete. One of them is for each student to teach a topic of their choosing to a group of their own peers. "Isn't it more motivating to learn about a subject to share with your friends, rather than to write about it for an instructor who's already studied it at length?" she explains.

One topic that several students have chosen to share is fertility awareness, or cycle charting. When a woman charts certain signs that her body exhibits during her menstrual cycle, she can determine not only when she ovulates, but other valuable information that is unique to her. This is the topic that women get mad about. "Oh, they're happy to learn about menstrual cycle charting. It's having that knowledge withheld from them for so long that pisses them off. Knowledge is power." Louise Smith of *Ovarian Connection* is committed to women-centred education and to women's health. "Empowering yourself" may sound like an overused phrase, except when it happens to you. That experience can become the catalyst for change."