Our Doctors, Ourselves:

Barbara Seaman and Popular Health Feminism in the 1970s

Kelly O'Donnell

Summary: This essay examines the career of feminist journalist Barbara Seaman and her contribution to the circulation of health feminist ideas in the 1970s. Seaman, author of the influential exposé The Doctors’ Case Against the Pill (1969), became a noted critic of women’s health care and of gynecologists in particular. In her next book, Free and Female (1972), and in newspaper articles, interviews, and television appearances, she implored women to “liberate” themselves from their gynecologists and empower themselves in the arena of health care. Seaman’s media engagement contributed to the development of a “popular health feminism” that took the ideas of the women’s health movement public for mainstream audiences to consume and engage with.

Keywords: women’s health movement, feminism, women’s health, gynecology, health activism, journalism
“Barbara Seaman seems in all other respects a genuinely nice person, but she does have this thing about gynecologists.” So began a 1973 *Los Angeles Times* profile of the feminist journalist, who was promoting the paperback edition of her latest book, *Free and Female: The New Sexual Role of Women*. “The book includes a chapter on gynecology, so it took no arm-wrenching to get her talking on the subject,” Seaman’s interviewer noted as an aside to his readers. The article, “Author Labels Gynecologists ‘Piggish, Puerile,’” included commentary on modern gynecology from Seaman that was both serious and, at times, quite colorful. She explained that gynecologists often made “vile comments,” like “we’re going to take out the baby carriage but leave the playground” when discussing hysterectomies. “That’s disgusting,” she said. “If anybody said anything like that to me I’d punch him in the nose.”

Known initially for her popular health and marital advice writings in *Bride’s* and the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Seaman had gained notoriety with the publication of her 1969 exposé *The Doctors’ Case Against the Pill*. This muckraking book on the dangers of the wildly popular new oral contraceptive pill firmly established her as both a consumer advocate and a skeptic of the medical establishment. Many physicians, Seaman claimed, were too paternalistic in their treatment of their women patients, leaving them woefully uninformed about the pill’s potentially lethal side effects. Partly inspired by Seaman’s work, Senator Gaylord Nelson held a series of


2 Barbara Seaman, *The Doctors’ Case Against the Pill* (Greenwich, Conn.: P.H. Wyden, 1969).
congressional hearings to investigate this issue, leading to the FDA’s mandating of a patient package insert to disclose side effects to pill users. 3 Seaman’s next book took a more antagonistic stance and solidified her reputation as a critic of physicians in general and gynecologists in particular. 4 In magazines ranging from *Ladies’ Home Journal* to *Ms.* and on television shows such as *Donahue*, Seaman challenged her audiences to reconsider their relationships to their doctors and their prescriptions. 5

Seaman’s critiques had grown bolder throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, in tandem with her increasing participation in the women’s movement and her growing feminist consciousness. By the mid-1970s, she was a leading figure in the women’s health movement. 6 In


6 For an example of Seaman’s prominence in the women’s health movement, see her reprinted speech from the 1975 Boston Conference on Women and Health: Barbara Seaman, “Pelvic Autonomy: Four Proposals,” *Social Policy* 6, no. 2 (1975), 43–47.
1975, she founded the National Women’s Health Network along with four other women in Washington, D.C. This shift toward outspoken criticism of women’s health providers represented the emergence of a new, feminist health politics in the 1960s and 1970s. Feminist health activists challenged the medical establishment on several fronts, from the grassroots founding of women’s health clinics to advocacy calling for increased admission of women into medical school. Across the country, women eagerly read the popular health guidebook, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and still others curiously examined their own cervixes with hand mirrors and plastic specula. Activists working on these diverse projects organized together and identified as part of a “women’s health movement,” distinct from both the broader women’s movement and the consumer movement. In the *Los Angeles Times* article above, Seaman hinted at these broader health feminist critiques and proposed some solutions to gynecology’s problems, such as women’s health clinics and better access to information.

---

7 For an early history of the women’s health movement and contemporary coverage of the early years of the National Women’s Health Network, see Sheryl Burt Ruzek, *The Women’s Health Movement: Feminist Alternatives to Medical Control* (New York: Praeger, 1978).


9 Seiler, “Author Labels Gynecologists ‘Piggish, Puerile’” (n. 1).
Instrumental as both a public face of the movement and a behind-the-scenes networker, Barbara Seaman was a central figure in the American women’s health movement. In particular, she played a vital role in spreading health feminist ideas and in raising the public profile of the movement. The notion of a women’s health movement coalesced in the early 1970s, due in some part to Seaman’s enthusiastic efforts to synthesize a diverse yet complementary set of emergent philosophies about feminism, patient rights, and consumer protection. After her own personal political transformation, Seaman used her status as a celebrity author to help spread the health feminism gospel around the country, becoming one of its main articulators.

The direct actions undertaken by other feminists on the subject of health, including the development of cervical self-exams and the founding of women’s clinics, were undoubtedly significant; however, the circulation of knowledge was equally important. This was a revolution forged not just in the clinic, but also in the public arena. As a successful journalist, Seaman well understood the potential of the mainstream media to reach huge audiences. Her younger and more radical new allies in the early 1970s women’s health movement did not have access to the same kind of high-profile soapbox. Leveraging the tools at her disposal from her career, Seaman talked up health feminist ideas and shared them with far more women than would ever visit a self-help demonstration or hear a lecture at a feminist bookshop. Seaman’s colorful rhetoric and her ability to manipulate the media to her (usual) advantage ensured that these ideas traveled far and wide.

Scholars have begun to explore the role of the media in disseminating ideas about women’s health care in this era. Wendy Kline, for example, has demonstrated the exchange and
negotiation of ideas between the authors and readers of Our Bodies, Ourselves.10 Kline has also uncovered the significant role of countercultural writings in shifting attitudes toward home birth.11 These case studies were not isolated examples; in the 1970s, the media played a major role in the spread of feminist ideas of all kinds. Amy Farrell has argued that Ms. magazine was responsible for the establishment of a “popular feminism,” an articulation of feminist ideas that went beyond grassroots women’s liberation activists and into the wider culture.12 Jane Gerhard showed that Judy Chicago’s notorious “Dinner Party” art exhibit had a similar effect later in the decade.13 In the area of feminism and health, books such as Ellen Frankfort’s Vaginal Politics and Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English’s Witches, Midwives, and Nurses also found eager audiences.14 I argue that all of these publications, like Ms. magazine, contributed to the creation of a “popular health feminism,” in which feminist ideas about women, their bodies, and their


doctors circulated in the wider culture beginning in the early 1970s. Of all the feminists writing about health, however, Seaman was the most prolific. And in contrast to the works examined by others scholars, Seaman published in the most mainstream of outlets, from national newspapers to women’s magazines. Following Seaman and her exchanges with the public, therefore, is essential to a deeper understanding of how health feminist ideas were created and disseminated in the 1970s, beyond Our Bodies, Ourselves.

Hearing Feminists

Barbara Seaman had not always been known for her opposition to physicians. After publishing a few pieces as a freelancer, mostly on subjects related to childrearing, she got her start as a ghostwriter for Joyce Brothers’s successful, popular psychology column in Good Housekeeping in the early 1960s. She then developed her own writing career as a translator of medical and scientific advances for popular audiences, coauthoring articles and recurring columns with her psychiatrist husband, Gideon. In the late 1960s, she enrolled in an advanced science writing course.  


Her transformation began as she sat at a press table in the Old Senate Office Building on Capitol Hill. It was mid-January 1970. Hardly three months after the publication of her exposé *The Doctors’ Case Against the Pill*, the government was already taking action on her now-signature issue: the questionable safety of oral contraceptives. Gaylord Nelson (D–Wisc.), ranking member of the Senate Small Business Committee’s Subcommittee on Monopoly, read Seaman’s book and invited her to his Washington office to share her research that past fall. Now Nelson’s first controversial and hotly anticipated inquiry into the matter was beginning. Did the revelations about potentially dangerous side effects have scientific merit? Were physicians knowingly withholding critical information from patients? Should women be better informed about the risks of taking the pill? Nelson hoped to answer these questions by interviewing


experts in biomedical research, primarily those featured in *Doctors’ Case*. Seaman watched the senators preside over the testimonies and took notes as her own research came to life.

The first few days of hearings produced dramatic and damning statements about the pill. Nelson called the first witness, Dr. Hugh Davis, the charismatic gynecologist who wrote the provocative foreword to *Doctors’ Case*, presented testimony just as riveting as his text.19 “Never in history,” he claimed, “have so many individuals taken such potent drugs with so little information available as to actual and potential hazards.”20 In his prepared statement he provided an overview of the current scientific literature on birth control pill side effects and ruminated on women’s and physicians’ lack of understanding of the drug’s true dangers. His testimony was blunt and easy to grasp. “The fundamental problem with the oral contraceptives,” he explained, “can be readily understood by anyone: It is medically unsound to administer such powerful

19 When his product, the Dalkon Shield IUD, was later found to cause serious injuries and was pulled from the market, Seaman’s association with Davis became suspect. Some have argued that her contraceptive recommendations, though perhaps naïve, were harmful to her readers. For example, the biographers of influential pill spokesman John Rock accused Seaman of not only skewing her data on the dangers of the pill to fit a predetermined conclusion, but also of being “duped” by Davis and “mis[ading]” many women into using a highly dangerous product. See Margaret Marsh and Wanda Ronner, *The Fertility Doctor: John Rock and the Reproductive Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 269–74.

synthetic hormones in order to achieve birth control objectives which can be reached by simple means of greater safety.” 21 In prescribing these drugs, he claimed, “we are in fact embarked on a massive endocrinologic experiment with millions of healthy women.” 22 With Davis as the first witness, the tone of the hearings was clearly set: the pill was dangerous and women were being kept in the dark.

After Davis, Senator Nelson called upon Dr. Marvin Legator, identified as “Chief, Cell Biology Branch, Division of Pharmacology, Bureau of Science, FDA.” The subcommittee’s legal counsel noted that he had “been asked” to clarify something for the audience. He stated, “Although Dr. Legator is an employee of the Food and Drug Administration, he appears today in his own behalf; the opinions he expresses in no way represent the official opinions of his employer.” 23 Legator also explained during his testimony, “This is my presentation as an individual and not as a member certainly of FDA or HEW.” 24 His testimony began ominously, with a brief history of how the past decade had “witnessed the discovery that a succession of chemicals including food additives, pesticides and drugs were found to be chronically toxic to animals.” 25 Various chemicals had been linked to conditions such as birth defects and cancer. They were also linked together, he explained, in that they were “substances that have been on the

21 Ibid., 5924.
22 Ibid., 5924.
23 Ibid., 5950.
24 Ibid., 5950.
25 Ibid., 5942.
market for several years and in some instances decades.” If there were serious risks involved with continuing to take the pill—and, he insisted, further toxicity studies were necessary—there were certainly precedents. The pill was a unique situation that required “careful evaluation,” he explained, because “never have so many health individuals of child-bearing age been exposed for a prolonged period to a drug for nontherapeutic use.”

Some members of the audience had begun speaking while Legator delivered this information. Nelson interrupted Legator, citing “an undertone of conversation going on in this hearing which makes it difficult to hear the witnesses.” Nelson insisted that the expert witness be given the room’s respectful attention. “For those of you who want to carry on a conversation,” he said to the audience, “I would appreciate it if you would step outside.” Before Nelson could call the next witness, the protesters spoke up again. “Your viewpoints will be heard, don’t worry about that,” he told them, moving along to introduce Dr. David Carr, a professor of anatomy at McMaster University in Canada.

Carr began his presentation on studies about birth control pills and the potential threat of birth defects, but was soon interrupted by hecklers as well. Nelson repeated that the audience should be seated and quiet for Carr’s testimony and asked once more that those who interrupted go outside the hearing room to have a discussion. Essentially, he was explaining the basic rules

26 Ibid., 5942.

27 Ibid., 5942.

28 Ibid., 5943.

29 Ibid., 5943.
of conduct for these formalized government proceedings. When Carr resumed speaking, he too engaged with the audience members by explaining what he saw as the unfortunate reality of laboratory research. “The ladies who made the disturbance a short while back ‘why are we being used as guinea pigs,’” he replied: “I am afraid we have to face facts . . . with every drug and with every atmospheric pollutant the human being is the guinea pig because there is no other way . . . We have to test everything on humans, and this is tough, but it is a fact of life. There is no way to substitute any animal experiment for a human experiment.” Carr’s explanation missed the point. The protesters were pointing out that unwitting consumers of the pill were the human experiment.

Seaman was “both embarrassed and pleased” by the group of young women who stood up, unprompted, and began asking questions. They were members of D.C. Women’s Liberation, a local feminist group. They had read about the hearings in the newspaper and traveled across town to watch. Like nine million American women by 1970, they had taken oral contraceptives themselves. The women were unpleasantly surprised by what they learned.

30 Ibid., 6000.
31 Ibid., 6003.
33 Watkins, On the Pill (n. 3), 123.
Alice Wolfson, a protester that day, later explained, “When we got there, we were both frightened, really frightened by the content and appalled by the fact that all of the senators were men [and] all of the people testifying were men.” The women announced that one of them had been “made sterile by the pill.” They also wanted to know a few other things: Why were women being used as guinea pigs? Why weren’t women testifying? “Nothing makes the oppression of women more obvious than the hearing today,” they boldly declared in words that were repeated and published in national media outlets such as the Washington Post. Senator Nelson tried in vain to restore order to his hearings. Nevertheless, the women persisted, drawing increasing media attention to the hearings and its subject of investigation with each passing day.

While the hearings continued and attracted significant media attention, Seaman discussed these unrelenting women’s liberation protesters in an interview with the New York Post. She described herself as “sort of on the side of” Women’s Lib, but not a member or activist.” Seaman was already a member of the National Organization for Women and was a friend of that organization’s cofounder and first president, Betty Friedan, who once persuaded her to speak out about her illegal abortion as a college student in the 1950s at a political event, in front of

35 Quoted in Watkins, On the Pill (n. 3), 116.
38 Yuncker, “Woman in the News” (n. 32).
This is a preprint of an accepted article scheduled to appear in the Bulletin of the History of Medicine, vol. 93, no. 4 (Winter 2019). It has been copyedited but not paginated. Further edits are possible. Please check back for final article publication details.

14 television cameras. 39 This was still a shocking and radical political act, but Seaman nonetheless sensed that there was a wide gulf between this group and the younger, more radical “women’s liberation” groups. Seaman viewed these women, the “Mongol hordes” of feminism, as intriguing, slightly embarrassing, and altogether different. 40 As Seaman later saw it, there were two types of New York feminists at the dawn of the 1970s: uptown versus downtown. It was “as though 14th Street was the great divide,” she recalled, “and we never went below it and they never came up.” 41 The downtown feminists, composed of small groups, espoused a newer, more radical politics.

Seaman was not affiliated with these radical New York feminists. She reflected years later, “They could have come to me. They must have been aware that there was this lady running


40 In 1972 Seaman reflected on the utility of these “Mongol hordes” in making the other, more moderate feminists seem more respectable to skeptics. Seaman, Free and Female (n. 4), preface.

41 Barbara Seaman, interview by Elizabeth Watkins, January 30, 1994, transcript.
about in the women’s magazines saying that [the pill] was dangerous.” In fact, in 1968, protesters from the new group New York Radical Women had thrown copies of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, along with other “instruments of female torture,” into their freedom trash can at the now infamous Miss America Pageant protest in Atlantic City. In March 1970, just two weeks after the Nelson hearings ended, a group comprising New York Radical Women and Redstockings members invaded the *Ladies’ Home Journal* offices and held a sit-in, demanding changes to the magazine’s content and management. They did not come to her in New York.

After several days of protesting, D.C. Women’s Liberation had distilled their concerns for easy consumption by the senators and the journalists covering the hearings. A flyer they distributed listed a series of increasingly pointed questions about the hearings:

- WHY are no women testifying?
- WHY are no women on the subcommittee?
- WHY is the profitable relationship between doctors and drug companies whitewashed by the press and in these hearings?
- WHY isn’t there a male pill?
- WHY are contraception and medicine profit-making industries rather than free public services?
- WHY are drug companies deliberately withholding [sic] available information on side effects?

42 Ibid.


WHY is our government’s solution to world hunger to control population rather than the redistribution of resources? WHY are these hearings not discussing the issue of abortion on demand? WHAT kind of reparations will be made by the white male medical establishment to women who have been used as guinea pigs in this mass experiment?

Many of these questions were the same as the ones the women had been shouting. Clarifying their position, the document concluded with the statement, “We are not opposed to oral contraceptives for men or for women. We are opposed to unsafe contraceptives foisted on uninformed women for the profit of the drug and medical industries and for the convenience of men.”

Seaman took one of these flyers for her own research. On the back, she scribbled notes on the day’s disruption. She wrote down several quotes, including “Women’s live are at stake—these are women’s issues” and “I think that women should get priority over drug companies—they only have profits at stake.” According to her notes, one of the protesters snapped at minority counsel James Duffy, who must have laughed or smiled at their behavior: “You think it’s so funny, how would you feel if something happened to your own wife.”

Seaman ultimately befriended the members of D.C. Women’s Liberation who had disrupted the hearings. She sensed in their protesting an even better story than the one she had already written about birth control. They even invited her to appear as their star witness at their feminist counter-hearings on the pill. Seaman would later describe her friendship with activist

45 Women’s Liberation Press Release, carton 3, folder 146, Barbara Seaman Papers.

46 Ibid.

Alice Wolfson, and her political influence, as “transformational.”48 She reflected, “I was so impressed with her. I just thought everything she said was right, putting her political analysis on all of this. I thought, yes, yes, why didn’t I see it this way, why didn’t I understand it this way all along.”49 Whereas previously Seaman had been concerned primarily with informed consent in health care and the distribution of pharmaceuticals, she now began to understand women’s interactions with their doctors in broader terms of medical sexism. In the D.C. Women’s Liberation group, Wolfson had participated in its Health Committee, working for abortion rights and protesting inequality in local hospitals.50 Soon, Seaman’s analysis of the pressing medical issues of the day began to take on a more explicitly feminist tone.

Free, Female, and Feminist

As 1970 progressed, the feminist scene around Seaman in New York City began to change dramatically. A series of high-profile feminist actions and books attracted media attention, which in turn attracted more and different women to the movement.51 The Ladies’ Home Journal sit-in ranked among them. Local NOW chapters, including New York, saw an increase in and

48 Watkins interview (n. 41).

49 Ibid.

50 For more on D.C. Women’s Liberation’s involvement in reproductive and health politics, see Anne M. Valk, Radical Sisters: Second-Wave Feminism and Black Liberation in Washington, D.C. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

diversification of membership. In August fifty thousand women gathered in the city to march in the Strike for Equality, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of New York’s suffrage amendment. Seaman began attending a consciousness-raising group on the Upper West Side, as the practice, initially begun by New York Radical Women, started to spread. Between Washington, D.C., and Boston, Seaman was situated halfway between the D.C. Women’s Liberation Senate hearings protesters and the women of the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective. She developed long-standing friendships with both circles, lending her expertise to the women’s pill hearings and being cited in early editions of Our Bodies, Ourselves. Many


54 In the acknowledgments to *Free and Female*, Seaman credits Betty Friedan for introducing her to feminism and Alice Wolfson and the Women’s Liberation Chapter of City College for introducing her to “more radical feminism.” She also thanks her consciousness raising (CR) group. Seaman, *Free and Female* (n. 4). For a deeper history of CR as a practice and its relationship to the women’s movement, see Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women’s Liberation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

decades later, after her death in the early 2000s, Seaman would be eulogized as a generous friend and ally by Wolfson and OBOS collective members.56

But in 1970, as Seaman continued speaking to her “C.R. sisters” and reading newly published feminist books, her views crystallized. When she accepted a new job as the Childcare and Education editor at Family Circle that October, she thought hard about how her newfound politics meshed with a position at yet another very traditional (and reviled) women’s magazine.57

In an essay she titled “Consciousness Raising in a Cellophane Package,” Seaman argued that through her editorial position, she could quietly spread the message of women’s liberation to

56 Alice Wolfson, telephone interview with author, March 26, 2013. According to Boston Women’s Health Book Collective member Norma Swenson, Seaman “organized and led many of the attendees at what was probably the first ever Boston demonstration of the women’s health movement on federal property, at the Region I JFK Federal Building.” Distributing fliers and holding signs, the group of protesters drew attention to the issue of DES and demanded justice for those who suffered its side effects. Swenson recalled that Seaman “radiated entitlement and the rightness of our cause,” and that she “had never seen anything like it.” Norma Swenson, “Remembrance of Barbara Seaman,” in Our Bodies, Ourselves (ca. 2008), www.ourbodiesourselves.org/remembrance-barbara-seaman/.

57 Cowles Ink: News about the People of Cowles Communications, Inc. and Affiliated Companies, October 20, 1970, 2, box 32, folder 8, Barbara Seaman Additional.
mainstream women.58 “Whereas many feminists talk only to themselves,” she claimed, “I am proud and pleased that at Family Circle I am able to conduct a dialogue with so many millions of neutral or uncommitted women.” She claimed that she and two other like-minded editors gave “considerable time and thought to developing non-militant but consciousness-raising articles that are right for our audience.”59 An early attempt to raise Family Circle readers’ consciousness was an article appearing in the February 1971 issue titled “Are You Harming Your Daughter?” which explored gender stereotypes in children’s literature.60 She hoped that the magazine, sold at supermarket checkout counters, would reach millions of women whom radical feminists would otherwise alienate with their protests.

At the end of 1971, Seaman achieved a major accomplishment in her publishing career. Her column with Gideon in Ladies’ Home Journal had ended while she worked on Doctors’ Case. It returned in an updated form as a syndicated newspaper advice column. As the Bell-McClure syndicate explained in a letter to their newspaper editors, they were “replacing Dr. Brothers with Barbara and Gideon Seaman.” All of the Bell-McClure newspapers then printing Brothers’s advice column would be switching to “this husband-wife team” whom they expected


59 Ibid.

to “bring new psychological depth and insight to newspapers.”61 Seaman, they explained, was “a complete professional, and for several years ‘helped’ Joyce Brothers write her psychology columns.”62 Now an author in her own right, Bell-McClure announced that the author of Doctors’ Case also had “a letter from former HEW Secretary Robert Finch stating that her book is the ‘main factor’ behind the warning that now appears on every package of birth-control pills.”63 Given that the American family was in a state of crisis, the president explained, readers needed “intelligent discussion and guidance on the problems that breed divorce, drug addiction, teenage suicide, marital and pre-martial promiscuity.”64 Although the company’s rationale behind the need for such a column from a psychiatrist-writer duo seemed quite conservative, Seaman mixed in her own feminist politics at every opportunity.

In the series titled “Your Mind, Your Heart,” Seaman drew inspiration from her political activities, her work at Family Circle, and her research on sexuality and relationships for her book. The tone ranged from comforting to sometimes quite explicitly political. On December 6, the Seamans reassured a worried mother who did not approve of her daughter wearing blue jeans. They saw “no reason why parents should be alarmed” at this new fashion trend, which at

61 Sidney Goldberg (president, Bell-McClure Syndicate) to newspaper editors, undated, carton 2, folder 81, Barbara Seaman Papers.

62 Ibid.

63 Sidney Goldberg to newspaper editors (n. 61).

64 Ibid.
the very least was better than the previous micro-mini skirt trend. Later that week, a reader skeptical of some of the “women’s lib ‘crazies’” making headlines recently asked for an opinion on whether they were hurting the cause with their “shrieking” and time spent on “too many silly issues, like beauty contests, and burning bras.” Seaman explained that while these “extremists” may be off-putting, they were not representative of the women’s movement as a whole, and in fact they paved the way for more moderate feminists by making them seem more palatable and “more open to their justified complaints.” Seaman intended to use her newspaper column in the same manner as her Family Circle editorship, deliberately but subtly expressing feminist ideas to the broader public.

She also resumed working on a project that she had previously shelved in favor of researching the dangers of the pill. The arc of this project, which culminated in the 1972 book Free and Female, embodies Seaman’s political transformation. In the few years between the publication of The Doctors’ Case Against the Pill (1969) and Free and Female (1972), groups of women around the country came together and began articulating feminist approaches to health care similar to Seaman’s new philosophy. The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective originated had at a 1969 women’s liberation conference. Its members began by surveying local doctors and attempting to create a list of nonsexist physicians. Soon they decided that women


66 Gideon Seaman and Barbara Seaman, “‘Silly’ Women’s Lib Extremists Helpful for the Average Woman,” Dominion News (Morgantown, W.Va.), 4B.
should have a better understanding of their own bodies and compiled information about women’s health care into a course booklet. *Women and Their Bodies* spread quickly as an underground text in the growing women’s movement; soon the collective revised and renamed it *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and partnered with Simon & Schuster to reach a wider audience. But there was much more going on beyond Boston. In a California bookstore, Carol Downer “invented” self-help gynecology by inserting a speculum into her own vagina and encouraging women to examine her cervix. A March 1971 conference in New York was entirely devoted to the issue of women’s health. Across the country, women’s groups began establishing clinics exclusively for women’s health care.

It was during this early 1970s period that Seaman honed her unique style of criticizing physicians—especially gynecologists. For several years in the late 1960s, she had been working on a coauthored guidebook about sexuality and contraception with her psychiatrist husband, Gideon. Ultimately, however, Seaman was dissatisfied with this approach to writing about sexuality. After *Doctors’ Case*, she realized that she did not want to produce another “bride’s sex

---

67 For an account of the early history of the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, see Kline, *Bodies of Knowledge* (n. 8), 14–17.

68 Ruzek, *Women’s Health Movement* (n. 7), 53.

69 Ibid., 33.

book.” She “was going to throw away the material [she] had.” But before that occurred, her agent found a new publisher and she was able to reenvision the project as what she began to call an “honest sex book” for the 1970s. Completed in 1971, Free and Female was infused with Seaman’s new feminist perspective. A New York Times review of the book described Seaman as “a staunch feminist and an angry one.”

The new version of the book incorporated the language of the emerging women’s movement, with most chapters framed around the notion of “liberation.” The chapter on female sexual response became “The Liberated Orgasm,” while the chapter on child care was called “The Children of Liberated Women.” The first chapter, an extended discussion on the differences between male and female sexuality based heavily on Seaman’s 1968 Ladies’ Home Journal article, titled “Is Woman Insatiable?” argued for women’s empowerment based on their unique capacity for multiple orgasms. The introduction was practically an ode to radical feminists such as Kate Millett, whom Seaman thanked for bringing attention to the issue of women’s oppression.

Although newly popular early 1970s feminist authors such as Millett did not on the whole write explicitly about health issues, Seaman took their analytic lens and ran with it, applying it eagerly to her own pet concerns. On the first page, she confessed to “feel[ing] greatly indebted to

---


72 Ibid.

these militant feminists. In toppling age-old customs and assumptions, they are giving us all a new chance to become happy, healthy, fully functioning human beings.”

Through a deeper study of these more militant thinkers, Seaman reflected, a new feminist “realizes that bra burning is only a symbolic issue. And then she starts to burn on another level.” In the early 1970s, a number of feminist books were making headlines, including Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex*, Robin Morgan’s *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, and Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*. Seaman’s decision to frame the book in this way was surely in part to capitalize on the women’s liberation publishing zeitgeist. Yet the charged tone of *Free and Female* also reflected Seaman’s new, more critical stance.

While Seaman absorbed central tenets about sex-based oppression and the need for dramatic social and cultural change in the name of women’s rights, she refracted these feminist messages through a deliberately more palatable lens for her readers, who were not necessarily political or even sympathetic to the women’s lib cause. Although *Free and Female* was itself often provocative, Seaman did not aim to alienate. She discussed the difference between perceptions of loud, angry feminists and “most feminists,” who were quite reasonable, in her

74 Seaman, *Free and Female* (n. 4), 18.
75 Ibid., 20.
introduction. “Some of the women who discover feminism go through a period of intense anger toward men,” she noted. “A few, such as Ann Leffler, a brilliant young sociologist, opt to stay with this feeling. Miss Leffler wears two buttons on her lapel. The first says, ‘Make War Not Love.’ The second says, ‘Feminists Demand Immediate Withdrawal.’ She is perfectly serious.” But not all feminists were so angry, Seaman reassured her audience, and sometimes this type of radicalism was even necessary to inspire others. She claimed, “Some blacks need the likes of Rap Brown to help keep their heads high and spirits up, and some women need the likes of Ann Leffler or Kate Millett.” These high-profile figures, radical feminists and the controversial, newly imprisoned militant civil rights activist, were significant voices, but represented fringe elements. “Jesus was not a typical Christian. Stalin was not a typical Communist, Nader is not a typical consumer, Brown is not a typical black, and Leffler is not a typical feminist,” Seaman explained. “Unfortunately, it is difficult for many persons to grasp that the revolutionaries who define and dramatize a position or movement are not the same as the ordinary people who typify it.” Seaman owed a debt to radical feminists for her own transformation, but her job was to bring feminism to those who may have been turned off by them.

_Free and Female_ covered a wide range of issues and was marketed as a feminist sexuality book, but once it was published, Seaman quickly narrowed the focus of her publicity efforts to a single chapter: “How to Liberate Yourself from Your Gynecologist.” In Seaman’s view, talking back to one’s gynecologist was just as important as speaking to one’s husband about sexual desires. If, as she suggested, gynecologists were a “significant force” in withholding

77 Seaman, _Free and Female_ (n. 4), 19.

78 Ibid., 19–20.
modern women’s progress toward maturity and empowerment, then somehow besting the profession was a critical step in reversing this process. As she put it, “let us psych them out for a change.” But why put so much emphasis on gynecologists in the first place? For many in the women’s movement, notions of liberation were centered on bodily autonomy. The clearest manifestation of this concept appeared in activism around abortion rights. Seaman, however, took this a step further. In placing the blame for women’s ignorance about and distance from their bodies squarely on gynecologists, she was articulating a new theory of health feminism shared by others such as the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective. Just as Marxist-feminists located the root of women’s oppression in the capitalist system, health feminists began targeting the medical profession and in particular gynecologists as major culprits. As a medical journalist and a doctor’s wife, this explanation likely made intuitive sense to Seaman. Control of the doctor-patient encounter was a fundamental extension of the right to control one’s own body and, therefore, women’s place in society.

In the chapter, she criticized the field of obstetrics and gynecology, arguing that women’s trust in their doctors was often misplaced. Seaman did not mince words. The title page began with a bold quote: “‘You rape ’em—We scrape ’em.’—Sign in a Silver Spring, Maryland, gynecologist’s office.” This set the tone for the rest of the chapter, in which Seaman excoriated the profession. She claimed that gynecologists’ “authoritarian attitudes deprive [women of] autonomy over their own natural functions” and were “a significant force in keeping modern

79 Ibid., 160.

80 Ibid., 155.
women infantile and immature.” 81 For example, she implored her readers to “consider the fact that gynecologists usually call patients by their first names, while expecting the patient to address them formally as doctor.” 82 Some of “the biggest names” in the field, she claimed, were “actually highly paid salesmen for a product” and placed those products “before the welfare of their patients.” 83 They prescribed dangerous forms of birth control without telling patients about side effects. They ignored requests for natural childbirth. They scheduled labor inductions and unnecessary Caesarians to fit the whims of their golfing schedules. Ultimately, gynecologists were trained to “treat us as patients, not people,” a quote Seaman borrowed from the 1971 edition of Our Bodies, Ourselves, then still known as Women and Their Bodies. She recommended this text to her readers several times in this chapter. Seaman “liked [it] very much” and explained in a footnote how to write to the Boston Women’s Health Course Collective care of the New England Free Press, with address included. 84

What did it mean, in Seaman’s view, for a typical woman to “liberate” herself from her gynecologist? Although she promoted feminist health clinics and cervical self-exams, she was not advocating for a complete abandonment of physicians, in the style of self-help gynecology. Rather, in this chapter and her discussions elsewhere, Seaman advocated for women’s

81 Ibid., 140.
82 Ibid., 157–58.
83 Ibid., 198.
84 Ibid., 159; see footnote 7 for her recommendation of Our Bodies, Ourselves. Seaman also references another movement publication, Off Our Backs, on page 165, footnote 16. On page 196, footnote 39, she tells readers how to buy Our Bodies, Ourselves.
empowerment in the doctor-patient interaction. On the most basic level, this meant being a conscious consumer of health care. In press coverage during this period, Seaman garnered headlines such as “Writer Tells Women to Shop Around for Good Gynecologist” and “Science Writer Encourages Woman to ‘Shop’ for Her Gynecologist.” In *Free and Female*, Seaman explained that women should be critical consumers of women’s health services. “Patients err not in criticizing their doctors too much,” she claimed, “but quite in the opposite direction.”

For all the profession’s problems, Seaman even admitted that there were some good gynecologists. A good gynecologist, she explained, was “a human being first, not an all-purpose authority figure. He should be willing to listen to his patients and he should not pretend that he always has easy answers to their questions. When he doesn’t know something, he should look it up. The doctor and patient are partners in the patient’s health and welfare, not master and serf.” As long as women were empowered in their interactions with their doctors—viewed as their equal, treated with respect, and engaged in a back-and-forth exchange—then they should feel free to continue retaining their services. However, in light of the widespread faults of the specialty of gynecology, Seaman advised her readers to find a good internist or family doctor to perform regular exams, and “view the gynecologist as a consultant” and deal with him only

85 Moffat, “Writer Tells Women to Shop Around” (n. 71); “Science Writer Encourages Woman to ‘Shop’ for Her Gynecologist,” *Robesonian*, September 3, 1972, 4A.

86 Seaman, *Free and Female* (n. 4), 187.

87 Ibid., 200.
“when truly necessary.” Only when gynecology was viewed with the informed skepticism of a savvy health care consumer could women be truly liberated from its harmful effects.

Popular Health Feminism

Even if they were not personally involved in direct activism, through efforts such as Seaman’s, women were still able to engage with the ideas of the women’s health movement. While it took motivation to find and attend a consciousness-raising group and it tested comfort levels to participate in a cervical self-exam, it took almost no effort to open up the *Washington Post* or *New York* magazine and read about these ideas. Additionally, many health feminist writings came before and fueled the massive expansion of feminist clinics in the mid-1970s that brought women face-to-face with these new ideas. Like *The Feminine Mystique* in the previous decade, the profusion of health feminist writings in the early 1970s—from Seaman’s *Free and Female* to

---

88 Ibid., 195, emphasis original.
89 Wendy Kline has made a similar argument in the case of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. See Kline, “‘Please Include This in Your Book’” (n. 10), 81–110.
90 In her essay on feminist health clinics, Judith Houck notes of her two example clinics that one was founded in 1975 and the other in 1971, but wasn’t explicitly feminist in its earliest years. Houck, “Best Prescription for Women’s Health” (n. 70). Additionally, the client base of feminist clinics was not necessarily becoming movement activists themselves. Instead, many such as the one in the Somerville Women’s Health Project, in Massachusetts, were more analogous to community clinics and provided services primarily to local working-class residents. Susan Reverby, “Alive and Well in Somerville, Mass.,” *HealthRight* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1975): 1.
Ellen Frankfort’s *Vaginal Politics*—created the potential for consciousness raising about the body on a massive scale.

Seaman’s tenacious criticism of gynecologists continued during her *Free and Female* book tour. Through the media, Seaman was aiming to convince women that, as one reporter described her philosophy, “a good consciousness-raising group sometimes can be better for a woman’s health than a visit to a gynecologist.”91 Expanding on her emphasis on patients’ knowledge from *Doctors’ Case*, Seaman urged women to be proactive in their health care and consider that they might be just as, if not more, knowledgeable than their physicians.

In August 1972, *New York* magazine published a slightly modified excerpt of the fifth chapter of *Free and Female* under the provocative headline “Do Gynecologists Exploit Their Patients?”92 The editor chose to highlight a particularly inflammatory quote below the byline, in enlarged text: “Unfortunately, many gynecologists today persist in treating their patients more like slaves than like free human beings.” In the body of the article surrounding this particular quote, Seaman explained that in his writings, Plato had distinguished between physicians’ treatment of free citizens versus slaves. One must “prescribe authoritatively” with slaves, Seaman explained, but instead speak at length with the free citizen and not act until they were “convinced” of the wisdom of a particular treatment.93 Seaman followed this anecdote by criticizing the modern practice of authoritarian physicians to withhold information from their

91 “Science Writer Encourages Woman to ‘Shop’ for Her Gynecologist” (n. 85), 4A.
92 Seaman, “Do Gynecologists Exploit Their Patients?” (n. 4), 47–54.
93 Ibid., 47.
(female) patients. The main text of the article was accompanied by over a dozen sidebars, each featuring a testimonial by a female journalist about her negative experiences with gynecologists.

Some women were unsympathetic about what they perceived as Seaman’s overly combative approach. In a letter to the editors of *New York*, one reader begged the magazine to “please spare us from more feminists carrying on about their big bad male gynecologists.” The answer to their complaints, she argued, was “so easy to consider.” Women concerned by male doctors’ treatment of them should simply switch to a female doctor. She related her own positive experiences as a rebuttal: “For five years now, I have been going to a kind, gentle, sympathetic, intelligent and inexpensive woman gynecologist who knows from personal experience what it’s like Down There.” “Why, in these days of alleged liberation,” she wondered, “have so many intelligent women clung to the old notion that the only competent medical care comes from father-figure doctors?” She dismissed Seaman’s article as unnecessary hand-wringing, suggesting that feminist critics merely wanted to complain rather than seek an obvious solution. Whereas other women writers such as Nora Ephron and Jane O’Reilly had agreed with Seaman’s analysis and lent their anti-gynecologist testimonials to her article, Judy Klemesrud of the *New York Times* wrote very publicly wrote against her here.

95 Ibid., 6.
96 Somewhat ironically, Klemesrud was a feminist who wrote many positive articles covering the women’s movement. Upon her death in 1985, Betty Friedan was quoted as saying, “She is one of the people we can say thank you to.” See Judy Klemesrud obituary, *Chicago Tribune*, October
Others were more sympathetic to Seaman’s views. Shortly after Seaman appeared on the Today Show, she received a letter in the mail from Dr. Pauline Bart, a feminist sociologist working at the University of Illinois. “I admired your performance. . . . Here is some more grist for your mill,” wrote Bart, directing Seaman to an attached article, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Orifice: Women in Gynecology Textbooks.” The article, coauthored by Bart and her graduate student Diana Scully, was scheduled to appear in the American Journal of Sociology in January 1973. It argued that textbooks depicted women in a paternalistic manner, exacerbating the problem of sexism in gynecology. The authors pointed to one textbook as especially condescending when it declared: “If like all human beings, he [the gynecologist] is made in the image of the Almighty, and if he is kind, then his kindness and concern for his patient may provide her with a glimpse of God’s image.” The article concluded, “So gynecology appears to be another of the forces committed to maintaining traditional sex-role


97 Letters between Barbara Seaman and Pauline Bart, September–October 1972, carton 2, folder 73, Barbara Seaman Papers.

stereotypes, in the interest of men and from a male perspective.”

Inspired, Seaman decided to include a few paragraphs about the paper in the next issue of Family Circle.

In response to both the Scully-Bart paper and the negative letters to the editor in New York, Seaman wrote an op-ed for the New York Times. Seaman’s piece, titled “Dear Injurious Physician,” was both a defense against detractors and a promotion of feminist authors who shared her views on gynecology. Citing Free and Female (from which the New York article was excerpted) and several other recent publications, she admitted that feminist health books had been and would likely continue to be misunderstood. The key problem, in her words, was this: “Some women want to let their doctors ‘do the worrying for them,’ but for those of us who don’t it has been extremely difficult to get honest health information.” Seaman admitted that she and the other authors did not expect men to be sympathetic to their cause. However, she added, it “hurt[s] . . . when our own sisters reject us,” reporting that an unnamed reporter for the Times “complained that she was tired of hearing feminists badmouth their gynecologists.” She then proceeded to counter Klemesrud’s suggestion: “Why don’t they go to a woman doctor, she asked. She might as well have said, ‘Let them eat cake.’” Seaman reported that a mere 3 percent of the members of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology were women, indicating the unavailability of female gynecologists to the vast majority of patients. She also pointed out

99 Ibid., 1045.

100 Letters between Barbara Seaman and Pauline Bart, September–October 1972, carton 2, folder 73, Barbara Seaman Papers.

“there are some male chauvinists among women doctors too.” Klemesrud’s suggestion, then, was unacceptable and ignorant; the problem of sexist gynecologists was pervasive and practically inescapable.

In addition to defending her own arguments against her critics, Seaman was championing health feminist ideas more broadly. In her missive, she included a list of several recent books for readers to consult if they wanted to learn more: Ellen Frankfort’s *Vaginal Politics*, Phyllis Chesler’s *Women and Madness*, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and Deborah Tanzer’s *Why Natural Childbirth?* She even directed readers toward Bart’s article, writing, “Let the skeptics please . . . look up the January 1973 issue of the American Journal of Sociology. It will contain a study by Diana Scully and Pauline Bart on the images of women in gynecology textbooks. Even if the medical student starts out as a nice kid, he is bound to be a screwed-up sexist by the time he finishes.” Using the sociological data provided by Bart, Seaman attempted to prove her detractors wrong and legitimize the burgeoning genre of feminist health criticism, bookending this argument with a wide range of book recommendations.

In media coverage of the women’s health movement, Seaman was a dynamic central figure. Several months prior to the *New York* magazine incident and the *Times* response, Seaman had been featured prominently in an article covering a daylong New York City women’s health conference, written by Judy Klemesrud. Klemesrud reported that the daylong conference “turned out to be more of a gripe session than anything else.” Despite this assessment, Klemesrud gave Seaman’s views a thorough airing for the sake of a good story. Seaman drew cheers from the

102 Ibid., 35.
103 Ibid., 35.
Seaman became a media darling, receiving a disproportionate amount of attention in mainstream coverage of feminist health activism. Part of this was due to the colorful and controversial rhetoric she used, especially when speaking about gynecologists. But in addition, due to her experiences in journalism, she knew how to manipulate an interview and knew how to network with fellow journalists to gain press attention. As one reporter put it in a 1973 article, she “is a reporter’s dream. She interviews herself. . . . The articulate Mrs. Seaman took over the interview and rushed away with it for the next two hours.”

She captivated journalists. Seaman also personally used print media, her natural habitat, as a platform for sharing her views directly with wide audiences. Whether in self-penned editorials or in extended quotes in articles by other reporters, Seaman articulated the philosophy of the new women’s health movement and defined it to the public.

Through such writings, Seaman transmitted ideas and advertised resources. In March


1974, she published an op-ed in the Washington Post titled “Bringing Medicine to Heal.” Seaman described a burgeoning health movement, using examples from her own life. She began by discussing her thirteen-year-old daughter’s experiences attending an eight-week feminist “know your body” course. “Every Thursday evening,” she wrote, “Elana and three of her friends share a taxi to the McBurney YMCA in New York City.” While there, instructors sponsored by the Women’s Health Forum taught them about menstrual cramps, vaginal infections, pregnancy, and sexual health. Seaman noted proudly that soon, at the course’s final session, “as a kind of rite of passage, Elana will be given a plastic speculum . . . and will learn to distinguish her (cervical) os from her elbow.” She felt confident that her daughter would enter adulthood with a clear understanding of her own body and how to care for it. Without ignorance or shame about her reproductive system, Elana would undoubtedly grow into an empowered woman. While Seaman did not use the term “women’s health movement,” she noted that courses and centers such as this were “part of an informal feminist women’s health network,” which included women working in the health professions, women academics and college students, and many journalists like her. This informal network was attempting to force changes in women’s health care and “the Adam’s Rib attitude of biology that has so long dominated the thinking of doctors and of women about themselves.”

While feminist health activists had not yet adopted consistent terminology, their ideas were spreading through the aid of widely circulated materials such as this article.

Fellow activists also identified Seaman as a representative of their cause. Taking Our Bodies Back: The Women’s Health Movement, a 1974 documentary film, begins with an

---

unidentified female narrator speaking to the camera off-screen.107 “There are some people that don’t really want autonomy over their own lives,” the woman explains. “They prefer to let the doctors do the worrying for them or are squeamish or whatever.” But, she continues, “there’s another group of us—and I used to think that we were a minority, but now I’m starting to think that actually we may be the majority after all—that want autonomy over our own bodies.” The documentary goes on to feature footage of a different woman leading a cervical self-examination demonstration to a group of college students, a woman having a home birth, a woman being examined by a female gynecologist, and several women describing their experiences with breast cancer. Seaman is quickly revealed as the narrator of the documentary and clips of her speaking from her Upper West Side apartment are used as transitions between segments. She talks in generalities, noting, for example, that “the average woman has contact with a gynecologist at very crucial times in her life” and that “most of the things are done to us are done without a real informed consent.”108 Due to this intersplicing and her conversational tone, Seaman is presented as the expert to whom the directors are deferring on a variety of women’s health topics.

To Margaret Lazarus, who directed this documentary with her partner (later husband) Renner Wunderlich, Seaman was “an inspiration.”109 Taking Our Bodies Back was the first film that their new venture, Cambridge Documentary Films, completed. Local to Cambridge and with connections to the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, Lazarus was intimately familiar


108 Ibid.

109 Margaret Lazarus, email to author, June 26, 2019.
with the burgeoning movement. Having produced a television news program on stereotypes of women in advertising, including in magazines for physicians, Lazarus sought to highlight the variety of feminist health activism in which women in different settings were engaging. Having found *The Doctors’ Case Against the Pill* “really inspiring,” she invited Seaman to participate in the documentary.110

Filmed during the height of Seaman’s *Free and Female* promotion, *Taking Our Bodies Back* solidified Seaman’s status as a movement leader. As the only formal, sit-down interview, she appeared, essentially, as the film’s narrator and only talking head. After the final clip, featuring a group of high school students starting their own health-centric consciousness raising (CR) group, the film ends with a repeat of Seaman’s opening lines. Just as the credits begin, she echoes, “There’s another group of us. . . . We want to like our bodies and feel comfortable in them and feel in control of our own lives.”111 Although the documentary was subtitled *The Women’s Health Movement*, at no point in the film does anyone ever use that term. Still, Seaman’s use of “we” positions her as an authority figure in this movement, knowledgeable and respected enough to speak on its behalf.

Lazarus and her partner encouraged widespread distribution of their film and gave out copies for people to share as they wished, including Seaman.112 While promoting the paperback version of *Free and Female*, beginning in 1974 Seaman requested that screenings of *Taking Our

110 Margaret Lazarus, telephone interview with author, June 26, 2019.


112 Lazarus telephone interview (n. 110).
Bodies Back accompany her public appearances. On college campuses and in conference meeting rooms, audiences saw this documentary and listened to Seaman speak about a movement that they could learn from and even join if they wanted.

Seaman left a strong impression on her audiences, in print, on screen, and in person. After reading Free and Female, one woman wrote to explain her reaction to the book: “This book has brought out a lot of suppressed anger in me; anger over things that I know are true, but it’s so hard to believe that people, mostly men, really think that way.” Sometimes, she continued, “the anger came so strongly, I could hardly control it, but I knew I must. If only to be a little bit better than those of whom were the objects of my anger.” Whether the reader channeled her anger into activism is unknown. Nevertheless, the book’s effect on her thinking was profound.

After Seaman delivered a speech at a college in suburban Michigan, the campus newspaper quoted her as saying, “If we are to make persons of ourselves, we need honest information, not patriarchal myths,” and noted that she left them “a list of 35 recent books and articles which have helped her arrive at the conclusion that there is evidence with which to explode them.”


Seaman also shared the film with a group of gynecologists. See note to researchers, box 40, folder 1, Barbara Seaman Additional Papers.


Students in attendance decided after her visit to start a campus NOW group. Seaman shared information and resources, and her audiences responded.

Conclusion

In the wake of the publication of *Free and Female*, the editors of the American Medical Association’s popular magazine *Today’s Health* invited Seaman to participate in a debate with a gynecologist. They brought in Seaman as the token feminist critic, asking her what gynecology “can do to accommodate the emotional and physical needs of women and where it is still learning.” The transcript of the debate was published in May 1973 as the article “How Gynecologists Can Fulfill the Intimate Needs of Today’s Woman.” Today’s woman, as the women’s health movement had made abundantly clear, was deeply dissatisfied with her gynecologist.

After discussing the faults of the profession, Seaman told her opponent toward the end, “Even as little as five years ago, women simply didn’t think they had the right to insist upon anything in a doctor’s office. Now we do and I think that some doctors are beginning to change.” The representative gynecologist, Dr. Fred Benjamin, replied, perhaps unexpectedly, “It’s all to the good and I wish some would change even faster, because women should not be kept in the dark about themselves as though it were all a great mystery.” He concluded with words that could have been taken right out of one of Seaman’s books: “It’s a patient’s right to know what’s

116 Ibid.

going on and she ought to insist upon knowing.”

The overall message of the debate seemed to be that gynecology, which had been deeply shaken by all this criticism, could adapt. Feminist critique, delivered not just in radical zines and through shoestring protests but in the pages of mainstream magazines and on popular television shows, seemed to carry a significant weight. Eventually, criticisms became too loud for doctors to ignore.

The broad social, cultural, and political changes described by historians do not occur at random. Historians of American medicine have long pointed to the 1970s as a moment when patients, particularly women, lost faith in their doctors and began openly challenging the medical establishment. The women’s health movement, along with the activism of breast cancer patients, has been presented as the prime example of this trend. But where was the fuel for that fire coming from exactly? As I hope to have demonstrated in this article, one key to this historical puzzle is the active and deliberate work of journalists in reshaping women’s thoughts about health care. If the plastic speculum was the tool of choice for self-help advocates, leading women to a better understanding of their own bodies, then the popular media was Barbara Seaman’s preferred weapon in the cultural battle against medical sexism.

Arguably, the women’s health movement would have been far more limited in scope if Seaman had not advocated its ideas so vocally and across so many venues. Through her writings and public appearances, Seaman amplified the voices and concerns of many women across the country. She ensured that the central tenets of the movement did not remain solely within the walls of feminist clinics or on the pages of obscure, underground newsletters. Many who heard her message—from Margaret Lazarus to the college students who founded a NOW group and the

---

118 Ibid., 65.
countless women in between—were inspired by it.

Creating a sensation in the media, Seaman also shared with her audience resources for speaking back to their physicians or avoiding them entirely in favor of feminist clinics or self-help if necessary. “Gynecologists will change,” Seaman insisted in *Free and Female*, “if women insist on being treated as full partners in their own health. To put it another way, *we* can demand that they stop shooting us up—and shutting us up—with their clever combinations of hormones, tranquilizers, anesthesia, and fear.”¹¹⁹ Women, she explained to her wide audience, really did have the power to take their health care back into their own hands. They just needed knowledge—especially knowledge of their own power—and Seaman made it her mission to share.

* *

**KELLY O’DONNELL** received her Ph.D. in history from the Program in the History of Science and Medicine at Yale University. She is currently at work transforming her dissertation (a biography of Barbara Seaman) into a book on the 1970 Senate hearings on the safety of the birth control pill and beginning a new project on the history of doctors’ wives in America. She teaches in the College of Humanities and Sciences at Thomas Jefferson University.

¹¹⁹ Seaman, *Free and Female* (n. 4), 201.
Many thanks to the journal’s three anonymous reviewers and the following colleagues for their feedback on this article (or versions of it): Naomi Rogers, John Warner, Joanna Radin, Barron Lerner, Courtney Thompson, Jenna Healey, Deborah Doroshow, and Jessica Martucci. Special thanks to Elizabeth Watkins. I am also indebted to the archivists at the Schlesinger Library and the Sophia Smith Collection.