

{ OUR STORY }

THE EARLY DAYS

An oral history of Leichhardt Women's
Community Health Centre



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In 1974 Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre opened its doors. The Whitlam Government had approved a proposal from a group of brave and dedicated women in Sydney's early feminist movement who saw the desperate need for women's health and abortion services. The Sydney Women's Liberation Movement held its first meeting in 1970, partly because of what was happening overseas, but also because abortion had become such a prominent issue. After a very successful International Women's Day march in Sydney in 1972, and discussions about what to do the following year, a Women's Commission was held in Sydney where hundreds of women publicly told their stories for the first time. That led to the establishment of an early health and abortion service in Sydney called Control, which later provided the foundation for Australia's first women's community health centre... Leichhardt. This is their story.

NOLA COOPER, early activist

Abortion was a huge issue at the time. It was being covered a lot by the media and different groups were coming out trying to legalise it so it was a really galvanising issue. In 1971, Germaine Greer's book *The Female Eunuch* was released and it caused a sensation, there was so much media coverage. At the Women's Commission, women got up and talked about some of the terrible experiences they had trying to get abortions and having to go to backyard abortionists.

It was such an ordeal for some of them to tell their stories that other women had to stand beside them and hold their hand. I'm feeling emotional still, it was an incredible experience.

"It was such an ordeal for some of them to tell their stories that other women had to stand beside them and hold their hand. I'm feeling emotional still, it was an incredible experience."



submissions aren't the only way to lobby

Some of it was humorous too. In those days the newspapers had a specific column for women's jobs, separate from men. We laugh at it now but a lot of the ads said, *Attractive Woman Wanted*. So there was stuff we could laugh about, but also contributions that were very moving and poignant and distressing.

I remember when it finished on the Sunday afternoon none of us wanted to move away, everyone lingered in the foyer because we'd just experienced something so incredible. It almost felt like it separated us off from the rest of the world and people outside wouldn't have known what had happened inside.

After the Women's Commission, a group of around 15 women – who would eventually set up Leichhardt – decided abortion was the biggest issue to come out of the meeting. With campaigns already running to legalise it, the group decided to do something more practical, and found a group of doctors willing to perform affordable terminations.

MARGO MOORE, early activist

I was involved in the early stages of setting up Leichhardt as a member of *Control*, which was a women's health information service in central Sydney about contraception and abortions. We ran a telephone line and women would come in and we put out a pamphlet. It was the early 70's and it was still quite difficult for a lot of women to even get the pill, and very difficult to get abortions.

"In those days, the early 70's, doctors didn't tell women things they ought to have known and women always complained about the way doctors treated them.."

GLORIA GARTON, early activist

We were amateur counsellors but we had this group of doctors, mostly in East Sydney and a couple in Newcastle who would do abortions free of charge for women. They were mainly doctors who supported legalising it and had a social conscience because otherwise it was only available to wealthy women. In those days, the early 70's, doctors didn't tell women things they ought to have known and women always complained about the way doctors treated them, not that it was rudely but they were given minimal information. Women were a bit pissed off that they weren't getting answers. There was this myth that only doctors knew everything and patients didn't know what was wrong with them and had to do what the doctor told them.

NOLA COOPER, early activist

Wealthy women could pay for a safe abortion but poorer women ended up getting backyard abortions and risking their lives. We had these cards printed and we'd leave them in telephone boxes, in public transport, anywhere women would see them and pick them up. In the first year 335 women used the service. The name *Control* was an acknowledgement of women's right to control their own bodies, and the abortion service was so well patronised we started to think beyond it to do something bigger.

LYNDALL RYAN, early activist

There was quite a high demand and we were not convinced that the abortion services that did exist were entirely reliable. We realised it wasn't just about abortion but women were contacting us about a whole lot of reproductive issues. In around 1973, I met the Federal Health Minister or one of his staff in Canberra who suggested we put in a submission for a women's community health centre to the Hospitals and Health Services Commission. It had been newly formed under the Whitlam Government to try and break away from the big hospital system to community models, so that was where the idea was forged.

GLORIA GARTON, early activist

Since the Whitlam Government was elected they seemed to be throwing money around and they had a women's adviser for the first time in Government, so we decided we should apply for funding. None of us had the faintest idea how to go about it but someone who had worked in Government helped us write the submission.

LYNDALL RYAN, early activist

I got help from an academic who was an economist and someone who was actually on the Hospital Commission. Someone I talked to from NSW Health was really excited by the idea, which really surprised me because I expected hostility, but he was really helpful. Strangely enough, we got a lot of support from state and federal bureaucrats, they really wanted this thing to go ahead. It was obviously a sign of the times, it was 1973, there were new moves about providing new kinds of health services, and we arrived at the exactly right time.

GLORIA GARTON, early activist

We just thought we'd done what we could but when we got a letter telling us we'd got the money we didn't know what to do to start off with! We chose Leichhardt because it was a big migrant area. Once it was up and running we thought the outer western suburbs where there was vast public housing and lots of unemployment would be another good place to do the second one, which was Liverpool.



MARGO MOORE, early activist

The election of the Whitlam Government was massively important. The concept of community health was revolutionary because the range of things you could offer compared to conventional medicine was so much broader. Women's health centres were about wellness and prevention and that women should be in control of their own bodies, so it was a completely different paradigm.

LYNDALL RYAN, early activist

We were really surprised when our submission was accepted, I even got a cheque in my letterbox to go with it! We had enough money for the first six months but we had no idea what to do, we were shocked. We knew we wanted to be in Leichhardt because it had a very high migrant population and we knew there were a lot of migrant women who felt they were not getting appropriate services and we were very conscious of that.

BEVERLEY GARLICK, architect, early activist

We were looking at the possibility of getting a new building. The Council offered us some land but it would have been a very difficult thing to do knowing how building projects get out of control.

LYNDALL RYAN, early activist

We wanted a large house so it was comfortable and felt domestic and it took a while before we found the property in Flood Street in Leichhardt. The building was actually owned by a doctor who was very sympathetic to our cause and he had a very clear idea of how it should be fitted out, he was very experienced and really gave us a lot of guidance.

BEVERLEY GARLICK, architect, early activist

All the women did it, we only got guys to help us when it was absolutely necessary. We had a core group of around six women who would come every night after work and on weekends to get it done. I started teaching women how to use hammers and nails which most hadn't ever done. We built furniture and partitions and put up blinds and did up the back shed as a meeting room.

LYNDALL RYAN, early activist

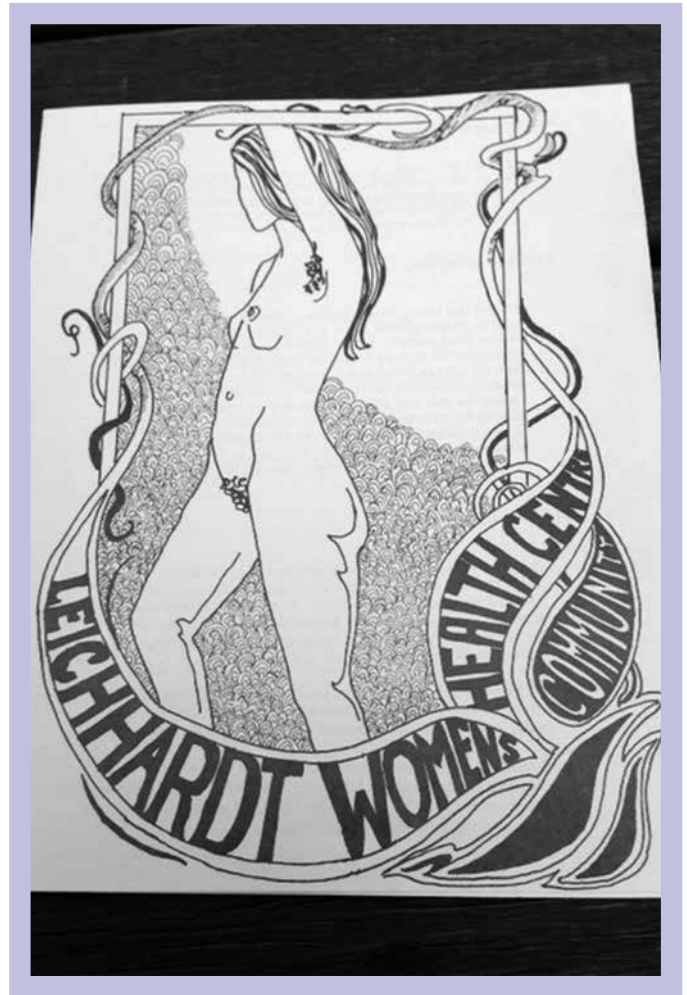
It took around six months from getting the cheque to opening our doors which was on International Women's Day in 1974. We got into a lot of trouble because we didn't invite the Federal Minister for Health to come and open it. I got a very stern phone call from the Minister's office saying they were very upset and disappointed that the Minister hadn't been invited! I had to go to Canberra and repair the damage. We got him there a couple of months later for another event but we broke every rule in the book. We were young revolutionary feminists and were changing the world according to our views, so we were a bit silly and wet behind the ears but we learnt very quickly!

BEVERLEY GARLICK, architect, early activist

At the official opening we had a lot of publicity and it was chock-a-block with feminist groups and doctors and lots of men who were really supportive too. It was certainly the talk of the town. There was an amazing buzz of excitement and it was extraordinary because we never believed we'd ever get the money and it was so new being the first in Australia, we got reactions from all around Australia. Some people were against what we were doing, but we also got amazing support from the medical profession and doctors and nurses.

KATHRYN COUTTOUPES, early staffer

The opening was a big build up, we just knew it was a big thing, we were really excited and really keen to get going on providing services. The actual opening was such a crush of people you couldn't move. There's a photo from *The Sydney Morning Herald* where I'm sitting on a tree branch because that was the only place I could fit!



"It was certainly the talk of the town. There was an amazing buzz of excitement.."

“I remember the doctors saying they were staggered by the number of women who came, and they were shocked to see their physical condition. Some had self-inflicted and self-induced abortions...”

LYNDALL RYAN, early activist

When the doors first opened at eight o'clock in the morning there was a long line of women waiting. We were astonished because it was mostly word of mouth. We had two doctors in those early days and they were driven off their feet for the first few weeks. We really touched a raw nerve in relation to women's reproductive health and advice. I remember the doctors saying they were staggered by the number of women who came, and they were shocked to see their physical condition. Some had self-inflicted and self-induced abortions and had wrecked uterus' and lots of reproductive health problems that hadn't been properly treated.

KATHRYN COUTTOUPES, early staffer

After opening our doors the phone didn't stop ringing. It was a really good thing that we had all worked together for a couple of months before opening because once we did our feet didn't hit the ground, so it was good we'd had a chance to get to know each other. I think that was really important given the incredible demand.

GLORIA GARTON, early activist

Abortion services were an important part of the early days because we had just had the Levine ruling but right up until then it was highly illegal and still technically was. There had been this big commotion about a private hospital in Bondi which had been doing abortions and the police raided it and there was a court case. The case was heard by Justice Levine who then gave a favourable court decision which had some conditions around abortion, but they were able to be interpreted quite loosely. Abortion was really looming large for a lot of women and there was a great outcry because there was awareness that high school girls were getting pregnant and there was a real need for safe abortions. There was a massive meeting at Town Hall so there was a big upsurge in women demanding their right to choose.

Our first doctor who ran Leichhardt, Stefania, just looked at the room when Leichhardt opened and said, *well there's the table and the room. We better start doing abortions*, and that's how it started.

DR STEFANIA SIEDLECKY, early doctor

When we set up Leichhardt there was a question about who would run the medical side. I was given the job of interviewing people for the job but then everyone just started asking, *why don't you run it yourself?* I was a hospital resident and had set up my own practice in the 1940's and 50's when there were not many women GPs around, and I was appointed as an adviser on women's health to the Whitlam Government so it made sense.

I set up the first abortion clinic at Leichhardt. I asked the hospital if I could refer any women to them if something went wrong, and they agreed it was a good idea. They supported Leichhardt because it cut down the number of women that would have to be referred to them. We did abortions one or two days a week and I'd see 8-10 women a day.

MARGO MOORE, early activist

Initially we did abortions as well as offering a range of other programs for women's health. It was difficult at the time because there were some private doctors doing abortions, but we were the first doing free abortions along with Preterm, which was set up around six months after us. There were doctors and nurses and receptionists and counsellors and we all decided to run it like a collective so we all had to learn each other's jobs and had a flat pay rate.

KATHRYN COUTTOUPES, early staffer

My father's family were Greek and from knowing what it was like to be poor and listening to the women in my family tell me stories about how they were treated in obstetrics wards, and listening to stories about unwanted pregnancies and contraception, it was a passionate interest. The women who were involved in setting it up really wanted to make sure the place was acceptable to immigrant women.



DR MARILYN MCMURCHIE, early doctor

I was overseas when Whitlam came in and it was quite soon after that I got to Leichhardt and I remember the excitement about those early years. Community health centres were a huge change and when Medicare came in life changed incredibly for everyone because patients became consumers. I do think treating the whole patient and looking at their whole life was a pivotal change, and it influenced men's health too.

Just before Leichhardt I had applied to do obstetrics and was told, *oh we don't give girls those jobs*. I think that polarised me a bit and booted me over the line. There were women working in factories who couldn't even have toilet breaks and were largely migrant workers, it was scandalous. I hadn't really come into contact with women in those situations before.

DR STEFANIA SIEDLECKY, early doctor

Wealthy women could get abortions because they could go to their own doctor and have an operation that they would just say was a curette, but it was hugely expensive, around \$400-\$500 which was out of the reach of most women at the time.

You would often read stories in the paper about a woman's body being found in a paddock or laneway who had died after a backyard abortion. I saw a lot of women who had backyard abortions, as often as every week, who were still bleeding and needed to be admitted and fixed up. There were a few deaths for sure and a lot of them were quite sick.

We also provided counselling before and after the abortions which was really essential, but we copped a lot of flak. There was a well-known female doctor who didn't believe in women having abortions and talked to the media a lot, and Right to Life protested outside the centre a few times.

KATHRYN COUTTOUPES, early staffer

Stefania was a very skilled obstetrician/gynaecologist and was so committed to providing a top quality service, but I know she felt the burden very strongly, because if anything ever went wrong she would be responsible. As far as I know nothing ever went wrong and it was wonderful to see women's relief at having an affordable, safe abortion.

DR ANNE NOONAN, early doctor

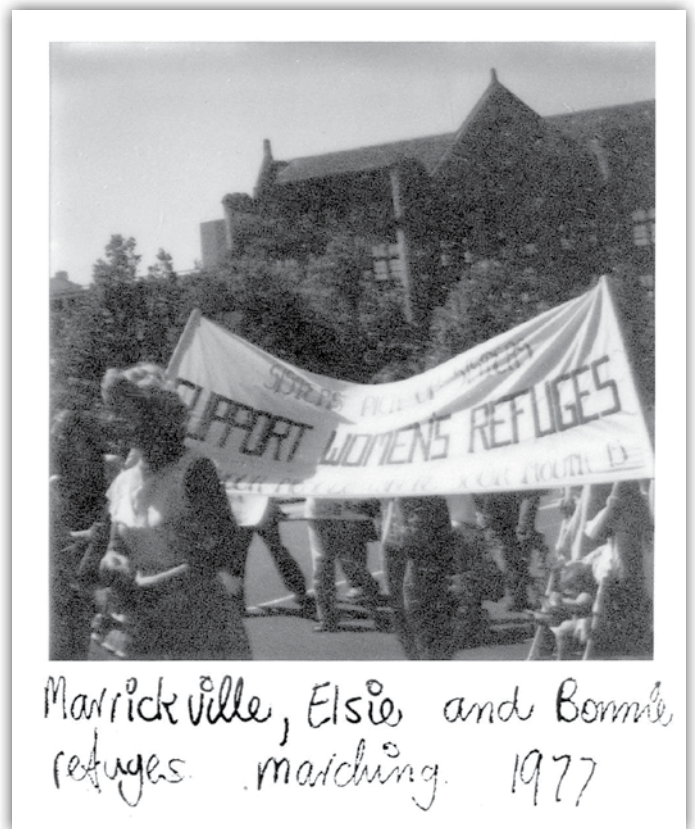
I got involved through a friend of mine who was a GP at Leichhardt. I'd been living in Italy and Leichhardt had a big Italian population and I could speak the language.

I also joined for ideological reasons because I thought it was important to have a free service. It was really Medicare that changed everything, because before that patients had to pay and poor patients just didn't go, so it was a wonderful thing.

DR MARILYN MCMURCHIE, early doctor

I used to have a general practice in the city in around 1973 and I worked at Leichhardt until I joined the breast clinic in 1981. I wasn't doing abortions, they'd stopped doing them by the time I started because Preterm had been set up, but most young medical women at the time fully supported women's right to determine their own lives.

I saw a lot of people who came for second opinions and most of the time what they'd received was perfectly adequate, but the difference was in the delivery and the treatment. There were some people who couldn't get contraception because their doctors were Catholic or didn't know where to go for terminations. But a lot of it was women wanting a second opinion.



“It was really Medicare that changed everything, because before that patients had to pay and poor patients just didn't go, so it was a wonderful thing.”



DR ANNE NOONAN, early doctor

I think it was terrific how women could go there and get counselling or other things as well as GP treatment, it was quite radical. The community health model was very new and revolutionary. I had worked for a doctor who was one of the initiators of the Doctors Reform Society so I was already moving in those circles.

When I was in Italy from around 1969 there was a lot of really progressive psychiatry and medicine going on, so in a way Leichhardt almost seemed mainstream and normal because of what I'd been exposed to. After the student revolution in 1968 these progressive ideas just flowed in, Cuba had a breast milk bank at the time so it all just came together.

KATHRYN COUTTOPES, early staffer

It felt like every woman in Australia was interested. We had people coming from all over Sydney, all over NSW and from other parts of Australia, just

women who wanted to see women who would take them seriously. We also had people who realised it was the time to set other places up in the rest of Australia, so we did a lot of showing people around. We sometimes had groups of medical students to look at the funny feminists! Men showed an interest too and they were welcome and we used to see women with their boyfriends.

"It felt like every woman in Australia was interested. We had people coming from all over Sydney, all over NSW and from other parts of Australia..."

DR MARILYN MCMURCHIE, early doctor

The holistic approach was certainly different, we had a herbalist and acupuncturist and at the time those things weren't offered anywhere else. There were lots of alternative people around, we ran groups and did lots of training for health care workers. I think that model had a lasting impact on the approach to women's health.

DR STEFANIA SIEDLECKY, early doctor

We offered women pap smears and things like that. A lot of doctors just wouldn't do them, even though they were doctors they didn't really want to touch women's bodies. But other male GPs and health professionals were really pleased about what we were doing at Leichhardt because they had such heavy demands on them. Before Leichhardt women would rely on word of mouth and everyone knew who the good doctors were and which doctors gave out the pill. But there was opposition from some doctors groups and the Catholic lobby about contraception and abortion. When I had my practice women would quietly say, *there's something I want to ask you about*, and what they were really asking was, *how can I get an abortion?* But when local churches warned women against going to Leichhardt they were actually just giving it free publicity and letting women know exactly where they could go.

KATHRYN COUTOUPPES, early staffer

I suspect the church was talking about us because one day when I was walking back to the Centre and was about a block away, I went past a car mechanic's workshop which is still there, and they started throwing stones at me. I got *stoned*, how medieval. I realised the church was probably preaching against us saying we were witches and lesbians who talked about sex and needed to be burnt at the stake or something. So it was a lesson, we were in the community but being part of the community where women had the courage to see us could be difficult, no matter how nice or open we were. But the church telling people not to see us just advertised it and gave us good promotion, even if it was hard for some women to actually walk through the door.

DR ANNE NOONAN, early doctor

The male GPs I had worked with were ok but women wanted to go and see other women. Particularly with the Italian women, there was a certain modesty or worry about contraception and things like that. I remember asking some of the women what they did for contraception and they'd say, *my husband worries about that*, which just meant withdrawal, so there wasn't that awareness of a woman's right to control her own body. But because of the abortion ruling it was very much improving.

Even though they were conservative in some ways there was always quite a good political sense amongst the Italians, the Italian Workers Union overseas was very strong and I think they were more politically switched on than the average Australian at the time.

DR JEAN EDWARDS, early doctor

What committed me to working at both women's health centres (Leichhardt and Liverpool) was the concept that women were in charge of their own lives and their own decisions. The service they provided was always based on what the client wanted, not on what I *thought* they ought to have. They empowered women to make their own decisions and it trickled out into general practice. We used to get referrals from Catholic practices because they couldn't send a patient directly to the termination clinics. They knew the termination was the right thing to do and would send them to us to make the referral to the abortion clinic. That wouldn't have happened if we hadn't been there.

DR MARILYN MCMURCHIE, early doctor

After being there for a while the NSW arm of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the RACGP called me to a meeting because they thought we had a bad doctor list, like a blacklist of doctors we told women not to go to, which wasn't true. We had a list at the front desk of doctors who were known to be fine for women's problems, so we had a *good* doctor list, but we didn't have a bad one. They were also quite concerned we had non-medical people doing pap smears, which I was signing for. Those were the years of *Our Bodies Ourselves* and there were a lot of them being done at the time, sometimes it was the nurses, sometimes it was the chiropractor or herbalist. But we had training days and checklists, I read all the reports, it operated as a proper health clinic.

The RACGP didn't take action in the end and I stood up for myself and reassured them that what we were doing was ok. They did have some concerns but it was really silly, because non-medical people had always been able to operate under the instructions of a doctor. But they were most concerned about there being a bad doctor list. It was just odd.

MARGO MOORE, early activist

There was a lot of opposition from the medical fraternity, they were opposed to any community health centre because they were interested in private practice and private profit. It was difficult to get any doctors at the time to come and work at health centres, and the doctors who did come were quite often ostracised by their peers. We actually had a male doctor employed at Liverpool after a few years because we couldn't get a female doctor at all. He was fantastic and supported a lot of left wing causes but in terms of the medical profession, it was really difficult to get acceptance.

DR LIZ RICKMAN, early doctor

I don't remember being criticised for working there because a lot of conservative doctors still didn't know what it was. But I did referrals for abortions and that was very different to where I had worked as a post-graduate trainee in general practice, where I had been told I was not allowed to refer for terminations while I worked there.

MARGO MOORE, early activist

The women's liberation movement raised a lot of issues for women in prisons, women workers and mental health started becoming prominent. Leichhardt was an early leader in mental health because one of the staff members, Meg Smith, had a mental illness and is still a recognised activist in that area. We were looking at the whole of women's lives and their oppression, and other things like domestic violence came up, rape, child sexual assault, the health of working class women and that had a major impact on the activities of the centre and the counselling that was offered. Women came to us with stuff we hadn't even thought about, so it just sort of evolved.

GLORIA GARTON, early activist

We also had counsellors at Leichhardt which was a first, and masseurs, naturopaths and obviously doctors. Meg Smith who had bipolar really raised awareness of mental health issues, and we also had a drug and alcohol counsellor, so it was very different to anything else at the time. Women could talk to other women and bolster their self-esteem, it was a different attitude.

DR LIZ RICKMAN, early doctor

Leichhardt was this amazing place doing all these amazing things, it was rolling out the possibility of transformation and social change. The fact that it had herbalists and I could be working with people who did massage and acupuncture and we had a chiropractor was *wondrous* to me. We felt like we were making a revolution. It was very heady and it was a very exciting time, because there was a real sense that we were changing the world.

"The women's liberation movement raised a lot of issues for women in prisons, women workers and mental health started becoming prominent."



MARGO MOORE, early activist

At Liverpool health centre one of the nurses was charged with doing an illegal abortion on a young patient and there was a lot of media. The nurse was actually arrested by the police and it took about 18 months before the charges were dropped, so it was horrible for the doctor and nurse involved. That was another reason we stopped doing them and left it to Preterm.

“The opening of Leichhardt really made a great and big difference, because people started having a totally different attitude towards how women were treated by doctors. I think it changed the way male doctors behaved as well.”

DR JEAN EDWARDS, early doctor

I was not involved in abortions at Leichhardt because they only happened for a brief period but I did post-abortion check-ups at a clinic in Homebush in the 70's and referred clients from Leichhardt there. It was a particularly good clinic, there was a lot of empathy for the clients.

I remember sending one of my young clients there with her boyfriend and they were both very uncertain about what to do. She came back to see me a week later with a bunch of flowers saying they decided not to terminate. To me, that was a really good outcome, and was as important as women *getting* abortions because it was a decision they made without pressure from anybody. That was something that Leichhardt was very very good at, they never made a presumption about anything.

DR ANNE NOONAN, early doctor

The people who were working at Leichhardt were very prepared to go that extra mile. If you saw someone with a black eye you'd be asking about it, you'd be onto it. Even now, once you open up something like that there are a lot of legal ramifications, I think it was easier back then to do things more informally and try and get things sorted out without having to fill out so many documents like you do now. There also wasn't mandatory reporting of things like child sexual abuse or violence, so we were less aware and less worried and just *did* stuff.

DR STEFANIA SIEDLECKY, early doctor

Leichhardt was just completely different to anything else at the time. Women could talk freely about what they needed and came from all over the place, I had someone come from New Zealand, and all over Sydney and NSW, interstate as well. I don't think most women paid, they just contributed what they could.

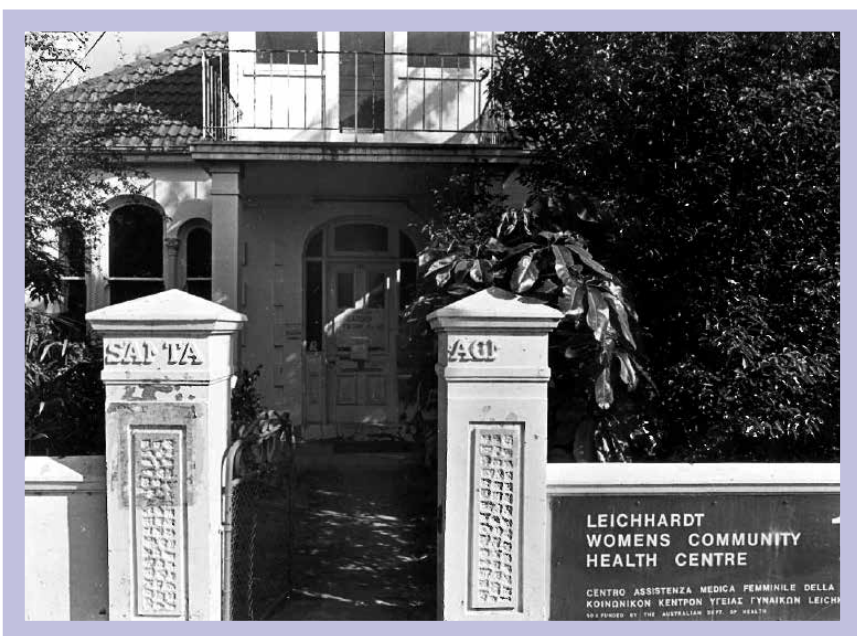
The opening of Leichhardt really made a great and big difference, because people started having a totally different attitude towards how women were treated by doctors. I think it changed the way male doctors behaved as well.

MARGO MOORE, early activist

I remember going to the first women's health conference in Brisbane in 1975 and we had put in a paper about breast self-examination and we sat on the front lawn of the university and made a video of us examining each other's breasts. We showed it at the conference and everybody nearly died of horror. The whole debate around women's health at the time was, know your body, do things yourself. But showing a video of all of us sitting in the sunshine with our tops off examining each other's breasts was *way* too much for the men there. It was still really difficult for women to get male doctors to do pap tests. We used to go to Bowral and set up clinics for a day and we had women queuing out the door because male doctors just didn't really want to do things like that, or any kind of gynaecological exams.

KATHRYN COUTOUPPES, early staffer

Our bible was a book by the Boston Women's Health Collective. It had been put out in the 60's and was a self-help manual for women to understand their own bodies. They were the first ones to show women how to do self-examinations and that was where we gained a lot of our knowledge. We made contact with all the other women's groups in the states and the UK, and an Australian woman who had worked in one of them showed us how to do self-examinations. We held a weekend workshop and it was absolutely packed with women, it helped them take control of their own health because they knew what doctors and nurses were doing to them.



DR ANNE NOONAN, early doctor

At Leichhardt we'd sit with the patient and ask them, *what do you think is the best thing to do here?* They were involved. If someone went to their Catholic doctor back then and was being beaten by their husband they'd probably fix them up but just expect them to put up with it. There wasn't even supporting mother's funding until 1971, so people just used to put up with anything, being bashed meant you just put up with it and stayed at home, often for financial reasons. That was marvellous when Whitlam brought that in, it gave women a huge freedom to get out.

DR JEAN EDWARDS, early doctor

I knew the co-ordinator of medical services to prisons at the time and put the hard word on him and got myself appointed as a Visiting Medical Officer and used to go to the women's prison at Mulawa twice a week. There were some really bad things that happened. I remember it getting to a point where I had to say something about how terrible their treatment was. Leichhardt and Liverpool, who paid my wage, agreed, so I started to publicly criticise the Prison Medical Service which was *crap*. A lot of women in prison are addicts and are often sex workers or doing other crime to get money for their addictions. The Prison Medical Service used to just give them anti-psychotics to settle them down, but they're not for noisy, argumentative women who'd been working on the street and weren't mad. The doctors would just dose them up for weeks and the prisoners didn't want to take them because they knew what it was, a really powerful anti-psychotic. The prison doctors just wanted to sedate them, they used the drugs as a chemical constraint.

DR MARILYN MCMURCHIE, early doctor

I used to go to *A Woman's Place* in Darlinghurst which was a refuge in the Cross. I had to take all my pap smear gear and see the women there. Partly because of my time at Leichhardt where I'd done so many breast examinations, I went to a medical talk at the Breast Clinic and I got offered a job by the director, so that's why I eventually left. It was a logical extension of what I'd been doing.

CHRISSY ARMSTRONG, early staffer

We really promoted the groups we were running, there were so many, every day and most nights something was running. We brought specialists in to talk and we were swamped with women, absolutely swamped. I think the group work we did in the 80's was extraordinary because a lot of the topics were ground-breaking at the time.

DR JEAN EDWARDS, early doctor

The final straw came when a woman attempted to hang herself at Mulawa. The prison told the hospital it was an overdose to cover it up, but telling them the wrong thing made a big difference to the type of care she was given and it was crucial to tell the truth. I made a lot of noise and wrote a formal letter of complaint to the Minister for Prisons. Eventually there was quite a big investigation and they interviewed everybody, they turned it upside down and inside out and it didn't make me terribly popular with the nursing service. Some were ok but some were really pissed off because I'd broken the unwritten rule that you don't say anything outside the prison. This was a few years before the Commissioner and Minister for Prisons was sent to jail for corruption. Parliament knew I was making a fuss and the Prison Medical Service knew I was making a fuss, and I'd written another letter to the *Herald* which also ended up on the front page, and that was when my permission to attend the prison was withdrawn.

DR MARILYN MCMURCHIE, early doctor

When Leichhardt was run as a collective, we had meetings for a whole day once a week although it changed later. Whenever I was working I was chockas and it was really hard on the collective days because we couldn't see people. If the collective were having a deep and meaningful sometimes they'd tell us not to come, and I never did find out what went on those days! I remember going into the corridor and seeing two women kissing and canoodling and I was a bit shocked, like when I was 13 and there was a heterosexual couple kissing! But they were very political.



“We brought specialists in to talk and we were swamped with women, absolutely swamped. I think the group work we did in the 80's was extraordinary because a lot of the topics were ground-breaking at the time.”

DR ANNE NOONAN, early doctor

I wasn't really part of the collective in those early days, I certainly wasn't in that inner sanctum. There used to be a Wednesday meeting all day when no patients were seen, and some of the meetings were pretty bloody because I remember people coming out ashen-faced and shaking at times. But because the doctors just worked and worked, we didn't go into those meetings unless we thought we should for some reason, but I do remember them being somewhat full-on.

BEVERLEY GARLICK, architect and early activist

I wasn't employed there but was in the collective for several years and it was pretty fiery at times. We had a mixture of quite radical women, women from the left and more conservative women, even communist women who we argued with a lot, but it was all fascinating. The thing that made me less interested was the alternative health scene, and people who were not supportive of the doctors. They were only interested in alternative health and wanted to ignore the core medical stuff which I thought was essential, and that's when I left. There were a lot of arguments about that, and a really strong lesbian faction took over and blamed doctors for everything, and that's when they lost me and a lot of others. That was around 1980. I certainly felt not so welcome anymore.

"We ran it as a collective in the early days but there were problems. It kind of worked but there were disagreements and endless meetings so you couldn't do anything without consensus on everything and it eventually collapsed."

GLORIA GARTON, early activist

We ran it as a collective in the early days but there were problems. It kind of worked but there were disagreements and endless meetings so you couldn't do anything without consensus on *everything* and it eventually collapsed. We learnt a lot from it but it just didn't work.

BEVERLEY GARLICK, architect and early activist

The Centre got all types of women together. For the first time in my life I met older migrant women and they were so appreciative that such a place existed where they were welcome, compared to hostility from the medical profession. But it became the opposite of that, and it was a shock to those of us that had set up the place, that suddenly these ideals weren't held in high regard.

MARGO MOORE, early activist

It was a very interesting time in the women's movement because there were all the divisions like the separatists, and Leichhardt started to do a range of things, but there were debates about whether to even provide contraception because that was colluding with men, or sleeping with the enemy! They just believed women should have relationships with women. People had very deeply-held views about stuff. It didn't last a long time and wasn't feasible at all, but it was one of the political debates that happened at Leichhardt in the early days.

DR ANNE NOONAN, early doctor

You could see there were a couple of women who were very very bossy and they were stand over merchants, in my opinion.

CHRISSEY ARMSTRONG, staffer

At certain events and things I knew people who'd been involved with Leichhardt and had gotten the drift of some of the great stuff that had been happening, but also some of the problems and challenges it

was facing. It had lost its way a bit. There were some older women there, long term feminist activists who were just shaking their heads at the state it had got into after being hijacked by extreme radical ideology. It didn't feel comfortable for women who were more mainstream to access the services.

BEVERLEY GARLICK, architect and early activist

The alternative health and the separatist lesbians just had their interests and at the time it wasn't an outlook that wanted to incorporate all sorts of people from many backgrounds. It was isolationist compared to what we originally got going, where we were all working together. They were treating the doctors - who had put themselves out financially to work for us - really badly, and it was a real slap in the face for them. They had no respect for people who had been trained, but you can't have babies and you can't have abortions or any other problems sorted out without proper medicine.



DR ANNE NOONAN, early doctor

I do remember some of the collective thinking or treating the doctors like second class citizens. I think at one stage there was a discussion about just sacking all the doctors and having untrained women doing medical procedures, but that didn't happen thankfully. I won't say it got quite like Cambodia when they started killing all the intellectuals, but I do remember someone saying the doctors weren't needed, but no-one picked it up and we stayed there!

CHRISSY ARMSTRONG, staffer

I was surprised. I knew there were issues but I remember long conversations with other staff in those early months about just how big the problem really was, and what we had to change in terms of getting a new image out there.

There was some resistance from within. The new team was brought in after the worst internal struggles were over. Some of the older women on the board had gone in and really taken on the core group, so they'd all left once we started, but some were fairly resistant to change. Leichhardt's funding was on the nose with the Health Department and these older women, who had long fought for women's rights and services, were fantastic in going in and shaking it up before the funding was permanently lost. It was definitely in trouble and we were there to change it.

DR ANNE NOONAN, early doctor

I wouldn't want to put it down too much but in any revolutionary situation like that you'll always get people who are genuinely wanting reforms, but unfortunately some people get very fundamentalist about it and it can get a bit unpleasant and it did there.

CHRISSY ARMSTRONG, staffer

The new staff had a very clear brief to shake things up and one of my immediate roles was to get out into the community and try and push an image of Leichhardt as being accessible to all women. I went to agencies all over Sydney and got feedback that the image of the centre in the few years preceding '84-85 was less than ideal, it wasn't a place for a lot of women to go. Women who weren't of a particular persuasion, or women who weren't of a particular political bent didn't feel comfortable being there, that was the clear message I got. The centre just wasn't accessing women across the board, whether that was migrant women or any women who weren't lesbian, who weren't radical, they often didn't feel very comfortable and I got a very clear message about that from the community.

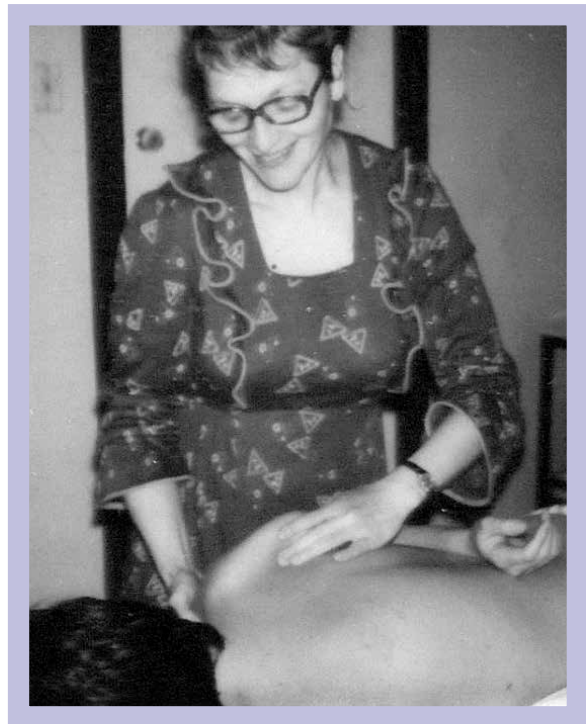
BEVERLEY GARLICK, architect and early activist

It had got to the point where straight women didn't feel comfortable going there anymore. It's understandable that gay women at the time who had experienced hostility would seek out each other's support, but it got overtaken by a hard core faction and a lot of us felt unwelcome, particularly the older women who had worked really hard to get it all going and had even worse services than our generation. It's part of a normal evolution, but compared to what it had been in the early stages it was a shock. It really lost its way.

CHRISSY ARMSTRONG, staffer

I remember workers in more mainstream services saying women who'd been referred there was that Leichhardt was not friendly to heterosexual women and they just didn't feel comfortable going there. Some who were in violent marriages felt there wasn't much sensitivity about how to deal with it, rather than just a simplistic *men are bastards* attitude.

We re-opened with this new model which was still feminist but all women were welcome regardless of ethnicity, politics or sexuality. I really got out and pounded the streets, we had new leaflets and were very aware of the language and images we were using to promote it as a professional health service. It took a really full on focus for around 18 months to turn it around, but we got GPs and other agencies to refer women to Leichhardt again because they'd stopped. But after 18 months we really noticed a change, and Leichhardt got its credibility back.



“They had a major influence over the years on GP training... so you’ve now got a whole heap of doctors both male and female who are excellent practitioners because of what we did. I think it really influenced everyone’s health for the better.”

GLORIA GARTON, early activist

We re-opened with the new model and the Government continued to fund us and we kept going. We had to move a few years later and couldn’t find anything in Leichhardt so found new premises in Ashfield. We had to go to a council meeting and there was huge opposition. There were Baptist Ministers and anti-abortionists, all sorts of accusations were made against us, but one of our greatest supporters was the Reverend Bill Crews, and he was a great help against the other Ministers there. We won the night by one vote, but before we even got out of the chambers, someone had put in a rescission motion which we lost by one vote. So then we had to find a new place and we eventually found Thornley Street.

The Centre moved to its current premises in 1988 where it has been operating successfully ever since.

DR MARILYN MCMURCHIE, early doctor

I think the lasting legacy of Leichhardt is access. Any woman could come and get a whole variety of different treatments, you could say what you wanted to say and argue the toss a bit. Sort out the mumbo-jumbo you’d heard and get it translated. I think general practice is better now than it used to be, because information is so much better. But the cardinal thing for me was access. Before Medicare came in there were lots of costs involved, doctors would have lots of debts, so it solved everything for doctors *and* patients. But I think it was more the attitude, people felt like they being heard at Leichhardt. I do think the whole system really changed at that time and definitely for the better.

DR ANNE NOONAN, early doctor

I thought it was good that people could come to Leichhardt with their kids, you could get babysitting so they made it a lot easier for women. Babysitting is terribly important if you’ve got an appointment or you have counselling or a pap smear or something. You could get a cup of tea, sit around and read a book, it was a little oasis for people.

DR JEAN EDWARDS, early doctor

I think Leichhardt changed the way medicine was practiced. I’m still always wary about the presumption that female doctors are going to be better than men, but the model that Leichhardt began put the woman right at the centre of all decisions and that fitted with my political approach to medicine. It also helped with my work later at Royal North Shore Hospital, working with women who had been sexually assaulted and making sure that whatever happened to women was in their own hands. Leichhardt and Liverpool were the first people to really put that up front as necessary for health. I think it improved the quality of care for men and women in the sense that there is more listening now to what patients want, rather than what doctors want.

KATHRYN COUTOUPES, early staffer

Leichhardt helped create *community health*, we were on the frontline and broke down some of the barriers that some people in the medical profession had constructed. I’m in no way anti-doctor, but there was a privileged class of some doctors. We provided the model of how you could do community health that was consumer friendly and women friendly. Women’s health is now an arm of health in Australia, when I worked at the NSW Health Department in the early 70’s it wasn’t even thought of.

MARGO MOORE, early activist

For me, it was one of the most exciting and fulfilling periods of my life because I was putting my political and social beliefs into action. There was no limitation to what we thought we could do. There was something new happening all the time and it was really about seeing how broader social problems were affecting women’s health and lives. I think challenging the notion of the sickness model to an empowerment and prevention model was ground-breaking. They had a major influence over the years on GP training, and I worked with the College of General Practitioners on developing courses, so you’ve now got a whole heap of doctors both male and female who are excellent practitioners because of what we did. I think it really influenced everyone’s health for the better.





DR JEAN EDWARDS

I think it's wrong to think it terms of male and female doctors as being bad or good because sometimes female doctors are an absolute disaster. They come through the system and are so conscious of the need to compete with men that they become quite aggressive, and can be very controlling and treat their patients badly. But the setting up of Leichhardt was crucial because it forced people to realise that the patriarchal attitude of doctors who said, *I'm going to do this to you* had to change. I really don't believe that change would have happened in general practice if it hadn't been for Leichhardt and Liverpool.

KATHRYN COUTOUPES, early staffer

We were a politically important but tiny group who were the visible start of the change. A lot of people's ideas were changing already, and Leichhardt brought things to the fore and let them know these things were possible.

CHRISSY ARMSTRONG, early staffer

It was more than a job to us, it was our passion to make the service all that it claimed it was going to do. I have very fond memories of that time because it was a fabulous project getting it back on track. It was really taking it back to its original vision to promote feminist health care to as many women as possible, as well as to influence mainstream health care, and we really pushed that very hard. I remember the 'f' word being an issue. We tried to overcome that by working with a whole range of people like the Country Women's Association and some other Christian women's associations, and our message was, women *everywhere* have these issues.

DR LIZ RICKMAN, early doctor

I think the legacy of Leichhardt is the way it's become mainstream. We were a bunch of radicals and now it's mainstream which is wonderful. It's a very respected establishment these days, not that it's not radical because there are radical people in there and they will always think radically but I just don't think anyone would tamper with it. It's got a lot of credibility and does good work, it's an essential service. Leichhardt was so much about getting information out to migrant women and community campaigns and they did it way before anyone else.

I feel incredible love for the place, and gratitude to all the women that continue to work there and keep it alive with the integrity of purpose it still has. And that in becoming part of the establishment, it hasn't been compromised.

"I feel incredible love for the place, and gratitude to all the women that continue to work there and keep it alive..."

{ LEICHHARDT WOMEN'S } NOW

"If I didn't know about the women's health centre I'd be suffering more about there in the community, unnecessarily. Even if I couldn't come back to this centre tomorrow I feel that I've learnt enough to sustain me forever."

Elsa,
40 Stories for
40 Years

Australia's first women's health centre, Leichhardt, provides multidisciplinary health care to over 3,500 women a year, most of whom are on very low incomes and have complex health needs. The centre now has five clinic sites, a specialist statewide counselling service and provides health education throughout eight local government areas. Its 20 health professionals range from general practitioners, women's health nursing, acupuncture, physiotherapy, manual lymphatic drainage massage therapy, counselling, naturopathy, health education and drug and alcohol specific services. The centre focusses on providing a safe environment and all staff are trained in providing trauma informed care which ensures the best outcomes for women recovering from domestic violence and childhood abuse. The centre works closely with an estimated 205 partner organisations and annually provides over 1500 referrals. Over 40 years since its establishment, Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre is still empowering women to live healthy and fulfilling lives.



Leichhardt Women's Community Health Centre

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