


JENNIFER KELLY

ZEST FOR LIFE

LESBIANS'
EXPERIENCES OF
MENOPAUSE

 SPRINGER



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First published 2005
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Edited and indexed by Kerry Biram
Cover design by Deb Snibson
Typeset by Claire Warren
Printed and bound by McPherson's Printing Group

National Library of Australia
cataloguing-in-publication data:

Kelly, Jennifer.
Zest for life : lesbians' experiences of menopause.
Bibliography.
Includes index.
ISBN 1 876756 46 2.
1. Menopause. 2. Lesbians. 3. Body image in women.
I. Title.

612.665

For lesbians everywhere . . .

JK



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Preface

My reasons for writing this book are twofold. Firstly, I wanted to give something back to the many lesbians who freely shared their thoughts and experiences with me, a total stranger. Lesbians, like members of other oppressed groups, have for too long been giving their/our information to academics, researchers and bureaucrats with little, if any, feedback. This book is based on the information I received from 116 self-identified lesbians living in Australia, who completed and returned an anonymous questionnaire during 2001 and 2002. After receiving this information I interviewed 20 lesbians from three Australian states and one Australian territory. The data collected from these women formed the basis of my PhD study, 'Lesbians' Experiences of Menopause', which I completed in 2003. This the first study to examine the topic of lesbians and menopause in Australia.

Secondly, I believe it is important that books and other information exist that speak to lesbians as well as heterosexual women. Whilst working as a nurse at a regional women's health service I was frequently asked for printed information to give to women about menopause. Sadly, the information I could find *always* assumed all women were heterosexual. In particular I searched for information that spoke to me and



many of my perimenopausal lesbian friends. With the exception of one book, published in the United States, I was unable to find menopause information that did not assume heterosexuality. This is my attempt to correct this omission.

I wish to point out that this book is *not* a comparative analysis of heterosexual women's and lesbians' menopause. To write such a book would place lesbians at the margin and 'measure' them against heterosexual women, whom mainstream society deems to be the 'norm'. Many authors have written numerous academic papers, research articles and books from this dominant point of view. My book explicitly places lesbians at the centre and identifies their menopausal experiences – some of which are similar to heterosexual women's – as well as those that are unique to lesbians, as defined by lesbians themselves. My hope is that by centring lesbians' positive experiences of menopause in this way, heterosexual women may see that societal patriarchal construction (in terms of the body, notions of femininity and the negative views so often internalised about the end of our fertile years) is in fact avoidable.

Much of the existing information for midlife women focuses on the negative issues commonly associated with menopause, such as dry vaginas, painful sexual intercourse, mood swings and low libido. For many of the lesbians in my study, these issues are of little relevance and are not major concerns or problems. They assume – as I do – that menopause, like any other life stage, is a natural process. Several of the lesbians in my study commented that menopause is a time of life to be greeted with optimism and enthusiasm. It is not my intention to downplay or trivialise the difficulties some women experience at this stage of life. I acknowledge that menopause is an individual experience and for some it brings a range of physical and emotional challenges. There are many books, pamphlets, research studies, clinical trials and medical services which assist women experiencing these difficulties. This book



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is not a guide to menopause, nor is it a self-help manual. Rather, I discuss menopause as a social construction and focus on issues identified as important by 116 perimenopausal and postmenopausal lesbians. It is my hope that you will find something in it that speaks to you.





Acknowledgements

I was determined not to write a doctoral thesis that, apart from my supervisor, examiners and one or two friends, no one else would ever read. So I was delighted when Spinifex Press asked me if I would be interested in rewriting the thesis into a book. Having never written a book before I had little idea as to what was involved. After all, I had just written an eighty-thousand-word thesis on the same topic, so how difficult could it be? I allowed myself two months to complete the task. Now, twelve months later, the book is written and there are many women I wish to acknowledge.

To the 116 lesbians from all over Australia who trusted me with their information and stories, I owe an enormous debt. Without their participation there would not be a PhD or a book. When I felt like giving up the thesis and wondered why I was putting myself through all the stress, I reminded myself that total strangers had given their precious time to complete a questionnaire and let me interview them in the hope that something positive would happen as a result. I was determined not to waste their time. I trust that they will accept this book as my thanks and appreciation for their valuable and important contributions.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My friends and family deserve a special 'Thank you' for their love and unwavering support. For the past five years, many of our conversations have focused around lesbians and menopause. They have always been there for me, willing to discuss, debate and challenge my thoughts and ideas. In particular, I thank Monica Hingston and Peg Moran for their friendship and encouragement. My parents, Judy and John, taught me to have the courage of my convictions and to follow my dreams. My parents' love and support enriches my life. My sister Frances and I share a healthy sibling rivalry and in true rivalry fashion, she delivered a beautiful healthy baby boy (Liam James) two days after my thesis was examined. I thank her for the gift of my nephew and for asking me hard questions that cause me to re-examine and reflect on my views and attitudes.

I especially thank Renate Klein who encouraged me to begin this journey in the early 1990s. As a mature-aged, off-campus, postgraduate student struggling with the demands of work, study and life in general, Renate provided me with the support and encouragement that enabled me to continue and successfully complete my Masters degree and later a PhD. Her belief in my ability and her passion for my topic remain a source of inspiration and motivation.

Kerry Biram has done a meticulous editing job and I thank her for her thorough work. Any errors that have slipped through remain my responsibility. I extend my sincere thanks to my publisher, Susan Hawthorne, who has been extremely supportive and encouraging throughout this entire process.

Finally, I wish to thank my partner Lesley Higgs for her patience, love and support. I am extremely fortunate to share my life with her. I look forward to many long walks on the beach with her now that the book is published.

Jennifer Kelly, Jan Juc
20 December 2004

