

Dr. May Cohen saw the backward history she grew up in with the forward eyes of a future she didn't just wait for but actively called into being - a future much less absurd and unfair than the past.

Largely because of her efforts, medicine is no longer taught using the male body as the sole model for diagnosis and treatment.

Canadian women no longer have to travel to England for therapeutic abortions or die in an emergency ward because of a botched illegal abortion (both situations being real cases she personally witnessed early in her career).

Female students are not separated from male students in medical school when they dissect cadavers lest they have to examine genitalia together, as was the case when she went to medical school in the 1950s.

Dr. Cohen, working in Hamilton, became one of the foremost pioneers of women's health, as a subject of practice and inquiry in its own right and as a standard of equitable treatment - not just here in the city but in Canada and the world.

Because of **Dr. Cohen**, a women's health office was formed and began to operate out of McMaster, where she worked.

She worked her whole career to advance women's health, women's rights, abortion rights, LGBTQ rights and human sexuality awareness in Canada and internationally.

Her enormous contribution, for which she was inducted into the Canadian Medical Hall of Fame (one of very few women so honoured), is chronicled - and her life and character fondly explored - in "The Gender Lady: The Fabulous **May Cohen**."

The documentary movie about her, which won first place at this year's Toronto Jewish Film Festival, will be shown at a special screening at Westdale Theatre in Hamilton.

It was made by her former colleagues **Dr. Cheryl Levitt**, McMaster Department of Family Medicine, and **Dr. Barbara Lent**, professor emeritus, Western Department of Family Medicine. Executive producers are cinematographer Zoe Dirse and performer Sharon Hampson of Sharon & Bram (formerly Sharon, Lois & Bram).

"It was only in the late 1960s and early 1970s that I became aware of a women's health movement," **May Cohen**, now 88, tells me. "And in 1975, which was International Women's Year, I was asked by Bette Stephenson (prescient physician and Ontario cabinet minister who did so much for women's health as an issue) to present at a workshop in Shelburne, N.S.

"I did so much research and reading to prepare to speak to the issues." But it's what the women there told her that made the deepest impression. "Their doctors (in Nova Scotia) wouldn't do Pap smears or breast exams."

It's like women's health was a non-issue for most of the medical profession.

The light had already gone on for **May Cohen**, but now it was greatly amplified and she made women's health her life's passion. Soon she would have a great canvas on which to express it. She and her husband, **Dr. Gerry Cohen**, were recruited by McMaster University's medical school and hospital in 1976 to help develop the department of family medicine.

The film covers the work the two did to raise the profile of family medicine and, especially in **May's** case, the cause of women's health. It also explores the beautiful relationship between **May** and Gerry, one in which

May found unlimited support for her work on behalf of women, even when it was more controversial.

As Levitt, the movie's director, points out, the couple studied together at the University of Toronto medical school where **May** finished at the very top of her class; Gerry was second. The two married before they had even graduated.

"In the 1950s, when **May Cohen** started her medical training in Toronto, medicine was a male preserve. Although she graduated at the top of her class in 1955, she faced a professional culture steeped in gender discrimination," says Levitt.

Even before she and her husband came to Hamilton, says Levitt, **May Cohen** was working for the repeal of the existing abortion law.

The film is enlivened by archival materials from **May Cohen's** past and the colourful history of her parents, Polish émigrés, who were activists for many left causes who sent her, as a child, to a camp where she would meet and listen to people like Pete Seeger, the great American folksinger and social activist.

Dr. May Cohen now lives in Toronto.

jmahoney@thespec.com

905-526-3306

The Gender Lady: The Fabulous **May Cohen**

Where: The Westdale, 1041 King St. W., Hamilton

When: Sunday, Oct. 27, 1 to 3 p.m., during the 50th anniversary celebrations of the McMaster medical school. Tickets from jewishhamilton.org and proceeds to Special Needs Action Project of the Hamilton Jewish Federation.

CITATION (MLA STYLE)

The Hamilton Spectator OPINION, Jeff Mahoney. "Fabulous woman, fabulous film - Trail-blazing Hamilton physician Dr. May Cohen helped transform medicine in Canada and abroad." *Hamilton Spectator, The (Ontario, Canada)*, First ed., sec. Local / News, 25 Oct. 2019, p. A3. *NewsBank: Access World News*, infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&doref=news/176CB7534923FF10. Accessed 1 Nov. 2022.

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