By Lesbians, For Lesbians: Feminist Activism, Identity Politics, and Health Care Provision in San Francisco, 1979-2011

For more than 30 years, Lyon Martin Women’ Health Services has provided medical care and psychosocial services to the lesbian community of San Francisco, but over the years, the lesbian identity of the clinic has been a continuing point of contention. For a variety of reasons--to be discussed in this talk--the clinic has always treated women (and eventually men) who identify as heterosexual. Consequently, the clinic’s stakeholders have periodically wondered how the clinic’s mission fits with its practices. The clinic has wrestled with a variety of politically charged questions: Who counts as a lesbian? Who counts as a woman? What percentage of patients must be lesbian to remain a “lesbian” clinic? Can a lesbian clinic refuse to care for straight women? Who needs the healthcare services Lyon Martin offers?

This talk traces the history of this health clinic from its founding, exploring the sexual, racial, and gender politics at the center of its history. It demonstrates the instability of the clinic’s identity, requiring the clinic, its board, its staff, and its community supporters to continuously reassess, redefine, reaffirm, and reenact its lesbian focus. Ultimately, I argue that identity politics kept the struggling institution afloat while simultaneously threatening its future.

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