

## [Carol Downer \(1933– \)](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

By: Horwitz, Rainey Keywords: [Downer, Carol](#) <sup>[2]</sup> [women's health](#) <sup>[3]</sup> [Abortion](#) <sup>[4]</sup> [Roe v. Wade](#) <sup>[5]</sup>

Carol Downer was a reproductive health and [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> rights activist in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in the US and other countries. During the late 1960s, many women reported knowing little about female anatomy and receiving little information from their physicians. Downer advocated for women's reproductive anatomy education and encouraged women to not rely on the intervention of a medical doctor for all reproductive issues. Downer demonstrated how to perform a vaginal self-examination to many women and taught women around the world how to provide safer in-home abortions when abortions were illegal. Downer helped start clinics throughout California which provided some of the first legal abortions in the US. With her reproductive health activism, Downer spread reproductive health self-help tactics throughout the US and the world, thereby improving women's access to health information.

Carol Downer was born in 1933 in Oklahoma and moved to Los Angeles, California, when she was very young. Little is known about Downer's early personal life before her activism in the late 1960s. Downer had six children with two different husbands. In the late 1960s, Downer participated in civil rights political movements in East Los Angeles, specifically fighting gentrification in East Los Angeles as a part of the Chicano movement. In an interview, Downer stated that her interest in the women's liberation movement began in the late 1960s. At the time, she decided to have an [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> after already having four children and feeling unable to support more children after deciding to end her marriage. When Downer underwent her first [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> in 1963 after separating from her husband, [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> was not legal in the US. In some places, receiving an [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> was a punishable crime. Downer underwent a dilation and curettage [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, also called a D and C, which is an [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> procedure in which the provider dilates the [cervix](#) <sup>[7]</sup> and removes the contents of the [uterus](#) <sup>[8]</sup> using a metal curette, usually shaped like a thin spoon.

During a 2017 interview, Downer commented on illegal abortions during the 1960s and on her own [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> experience in 1963. Downer did not receive any anesthesia for her [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> and, though she claimed the procedure was extremely painful, she considered herself lucky compared to other women who had received abortions. Downer claimed that at the time she underwent her [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, she had heard of women whose illegal [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> providers, usually male, would keep the women's underwear as souvenirs or request that the women repay them with sexual favors. Additionally, Downer claimed that other women who had illegal abortions were blindfolded, taken to unknown locations, and abandoned at the end of their procedure, having to find their way home. Many women died as a result of botched abortions. For those reasons, Downer claimed that she became interested in promoting safe and accessible abortions for women facing unwanted pregnancies.

The topics that Downer focused on through her activism in the early 1970s were mostly related to women's reproductive health and abortions. In 1969, California, New York, Hawaii, and Washington legalized [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> under certain circumstances. Those included situations when giving birth to the child was dangerous to the pregnant woman and the woman had a risk of dying as a result of childbirth. Though some trained and certified physicians performed abortions, most doctors did not in order to avoid losing their medical license and reputation. If a woman wanted an [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> where it was illegal, she had to find an [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> provider that agreed to break a strict federal law. Many illegal [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> providers were not medically trained or certified and learned [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> techniques in other ways.

In 1969, the same year US states began legalizing abortions, Downer joined the women's liberation movement, a political and social movement of feminist thought that also emerged in the late 1960s. That same year, she joined the Los Angeles chapter of the [National Organization for Women](#) <sup>[9]</sup>, or NOW, an [organization](#) <sup>[10]</sup> that promoted feminist values and gender equality. Downer joined the [organization](#) <sup>[10]</sup>'s Abortion Task Force, a group working to promote safe access to [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, and met Harvey Karman, an illegal abortionist without a medical license. Nurses and doctors had trained Karman, Downer, and several other activists on how to perform abortions without a doctor present. While working as an abortionist, Karman developed a less invasive early-term [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> cannula made of plastic, which was not as cold as the existing steel cannulas. Cannulas are medical instruments physicians use to scrape out the contents of a woman's [uterus](#) <sup>[8]</sup>, including fetal matter in the case of an [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup>. Downer's peer, Evelyn Lorraine Rothman, developed an apparatus which included a glass jar, a syringe, and a cannula similar to Karman's that she used to remove menstrual blood from a woman's [uterus](#) <sup>[8]</sup>. Women could also use the device as an in-home [abortion](#) <sup>[6]</sup> kit to remove uterine tissue and any implanted embryos.

In 1971, Downer named Rothman's device a menstrual extraction kit and worked with Rothman to modify Rothman's specific model of menstrual extraction kit, the Del Em. Downer and Rothman considered menstrual extraction kits to be less invasive and

traumatic [abortion](#)<sup>[6]</sup> options than those abortions that required metal cannulas. According to physician Brian T. Nguyen, twenty-first century health experts do not consider menstrual extraction to be safe for women because of the possibilities of bleeding and infection. In the 1960s, safe [abortion](#)<sup>[6]</sup> options were rare and menstrual extraction provided a safer means to an [abortion](#)<sup>[6]</sup> for many women. According to Downer, as of 2017, menstrual extractions were still performed in countries throughout the world and in the US.

In 1971, Rothman and Downer began teaching other activists how to perform self-examinations and abortions using their menstrual extraction devices. According to Downer, she and her collaborators felt that in the 1970s, it was safer to receive an [abortion](#)<sup>[6]</sup> from a woman trained in menstrual extraction than to undergo an illegal, or back-alley, [abortion](#)<sup>[6]</sup> from a different provider. Downer took a vaginal speculum, which is a device that professionals insert into the [vagina](#)<sup>[11]</sup> and use to view a woman's [cervix](#)<sup>[7]</sup>, from an illegal [abortion](#)<sup>[6]</sup> clinic and taught herself how to do vaginal self-examination and view her [cervix](#)<sup>[7]</sup>. On 7 April 1971, Downer gathered a group of women in Venice, California, to discuss opening an illegal [abortion](#)<sup>[6]</sup> clinic. In an interview Downer states that, during that meeting, she noticed the women were uncomfortable around medical devices. Downer claims she performed a practical demonstration with the speculum on her own body. Downer asserts that the demonstration helped alleviate feelings of disgust and fear that the women had felt previously.

In the fall of 1971, Downer and Rothman traveled across the US with boxes of speculums and menstrual extraction kits to teach women how to manage their reproductive health without a doctor's intervention. During their travels, Downer and Rothman recruited several women to join their activism and outreach program and brought some of those women back to California. Upon their return, the group incorporated as the Feminist Women's Health Center in California in 1971. The Feminist Women's Health Center provided counseling and some treatments for women's reproductive health issues. The Feminist Women's Health Center also established the Women's Abortion Referral Service, a clinic that provided [pregnancy](#)<sup>[12]</sup> screenings and helped women in California access abortionists.

In 1972, the Board of Medical Examiners and the California Department of Consumer Affairs raided Downer's Feminist Women's Health Center in Los Angeles, California. The officials that raided the health center, including a doctor, expressed concern with the potential loss of revenue for local licensed physicians treating reproductive health issues. During the raid, they arrested Downer for practicing medicine without a license. One of the crimes that they accused Downer of was aiding another woman in treating a vaginal yeast infection by inserting yogurt into the woman's [vagina](#)<sup>[11]</sup>. Downer believed that treatment would relieve the woman's condition. Downer went to trial and was found not guilty of all charges of practicing medicine without a license after arguing that using a home remedy for an ordinary ailment is not practicing medicine.

On 22 January 1973, the US Supreme Court legalized [abortion](#)<sup>[6]</sup> in the case of *Roe v. Wade*<sup>[13]</sup> and within sixty days after the decision, Downer helped reopen the Feminist Women's Health Center. The clinic was one of the first women-controlled [abortion](#)<sup>[6]</sup> clinics in the US in Los Angeles, California. At the clinic, Downer and fellow activists performed abortions. They also hired a licensed doctor to provide abortions, [birth control](#)<sup>[14]</sup>, and minor outpatient procedures. The clinic performed an estimated two thousand abortions yearly. Downer and fellow activists opened several clinics throughout California in Chico, Santa Ana, Oakland, San Diego, and other cities. Throughout the 1970s, Downer continued her activism for [abortion](#)<sup>[6]</sup> access rights and spoke out against what she believed were unreasonable restrictions placed on women seeking abortions.

Downer continued to advocate for women's health in the 1970s through traveling and writing. In 1974 and 1975, Downer traveled to several places in Europe and Mexico City, Mexico, respectively, to teach self-help techniques to women in communities beyond the US. In 1975, Downer co-founded the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers, hereafter Federation, as a larger [organization](#)<sup>[10]</sup> for several California [abortion](#)<sup>[6]</sup> clinics to operate within. That included the Feminist Women's Health Centers that Downer helped found throughout Los Angeles and in Orange County, California. Downer participated in the creation of three books by the Federation: *A New View of a Woman's Body*, *How to Stay OUT of the Gynecologist's Office*, and *Woman-Centered Pregnancy and Birth*. In those books, Downer encouraged women to take control of their bodies and not solely depend on a physician's diagnosis to handle women's health concerns.

Downer spoke out on several occasions throughout the late 1970s about her belief in people's right political self-[determination](#)<sup>[15]</sup> and autonomy. She criticized US international policy as being imperialistic and perpetuating oppression against women. In 1979, Downer traveled to Iran as a part of a group of political activists called Send Back the Shah, who demanded that an Iranian leader that the US was holding be sent back to Iran. While there, Downer said that she was displeased with the way in which the US carried out a coup against a democratic leader in Iran and that she believed that those actions led to Iranian militants taking US hostages.

In 1985, Downer participated in the US Nicaraguan International Health Colloquia where she and women's health activist Lynne Randall demonstrated, on their own bodies, how to self-examine their cervixes. In Nicaragua, where illegal abortions were commonly performed, Downer and Randall shared resources for and information about safe post-[abortion](#)<sup>[6]</sup> care with nurses and

female doctors. Also in 1985, one of the [abortion](#)<sup>[6]</sup> clinics Downer founded in Los Angeles, California, burned down from suspected arson. After the clinic burned, Downer and other activists in the Federation continued doing screenings from a van that they parked outside the former clinic. In 1977, Downer along with several other women helped found the National Abortion Federation. Downer served on the board and as the vice-president.

From the 1970s to the early 2000s, Downer was recognized for her work in activism. In 1976, [Life Magazine](#)<sup>[16]</sup> released their Outstanding Women edition and featured Downer in the issue. From 1987 to 1991, Downer attended law school and worked for the Federation. After graduating, Downer practiced law and specialized in disability rights cases. In 1989, the Women's Caucus of the American Public Health Association recognized Downer for her contributions to women's health. In 1992, Downer co-wrote *The Woman's Book of Choices: Abortion, Menstrual Extraction, and RU486* with women's rights activist Rebecca Chalker. In that book, Downer and Chalker discuss the use of menstrual extraction kits and medical [abortion](#)<sup>[6]</sup> pills to terminate pregnancies. In 1994, the California State Bar awarded Downer the Wiley W. Manuel Award for Pro Bono Legal Services. In 1996, *Ms. Magazine* featured Downer and detailed her service to reproductive health. Downer also received the Christopher Tietze Humanitarian Award in 1998, the highest award from the National Abortion Federation. In 2007, Downer was recognized in the book *Feminists Who Changed America 1963–1975*.

As of 2018, Downer works as an immigration lawyer in Los Angeles, California. She is a member of the Board of Directors of the Feminist Women's Health Centers of California. The [organization](#)<sup>[10]</sup> operates eight Women's Health Specialist clinics throughout California. She has a website called Women's Health in Women's Hands that features women's reproductive health resources and activism opportunities. She continues to promote women's liberation through talks and presentations, as well as writing books.

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## Subject

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