

# Women's Health On Board

## Part 2

Heather Francis

Carolyn.

### Medical Exams and Menopause

As we were preparing to shove off the dock in San Diego and sail towards Australia in 2009, I received a call from my gynecologist. The results of my recent pap smear were abnormal. It was a common occurrence she said, nothing to worry about. Then she recommended that I have another pap smear in six months.

I immediately began to worry. First about the irregular results, then about how and where I was going to get a follow up exam. There was no room in our meager budget for a flight home for a 15-minute appointment, I was going to have to figure it out along the way. But, a long list of concerns ran through my head; How would I find a good physician? What would the standard of hygiene be like? What if the doctor didn't speak English? How much would it cost? This was not an aspect of living on a boat that anyone had mentioned before.

### FINDING A PHYSICIAN

It turns out there were gynecologists in Mexico. And Panama, French Polynesia, Palau, and the Philippines. In fact, since my boat is my only home, I have addressed

almost all my gynecological concerns over the past decade while we have been sailing. I have always found the doctors open to my inquiries, the staff caring and helpful, the facilities clean and, perhaps surprisingly, modern.

Jan, who is 61 and just finishing a 16-year circumnavigation, has also taken care of her health concerns while voyaging. She has seen doctors in Mexico, El Salvador, Colombia, New Zealand, and Malaysia, and said they were, "all good experiences—doctors were generous with their time and happy to answer any questions." Like me she found the care and facilities very good. "I was quite impressed that most doctors outside the US did an ultrasound on my uterus and ovaries. A doctor in Mexico was the first one to do that when we first started cruising, and he told me I had a fibroid tumor which may (or may not) have been the cause of my heavy periods and cramps. No US doctor had ever done an ultrasound on my uterus. Outside the US, the ultrasound was pretty much standard operating procedure."

It can be a daunting task to find a doctor when in a foreign port, but the Internet is making it easier. Many clinics will list doctors' qualifications, specialties, and patient reviews

on their websites. Cruiser forums are a good place to find recommendations from fellow sailors. For a more hands-on approach marina offices often have listing of local physicians, or the female staff can point you in the right direction. And, since we're all in the same boat, you can always look to the women in your anchorage.

## MEDICAL EXPENSES AND INSURANCE

When I started sailing I carried private medical insurance, however like many of the women I spoke to it wasn't long before I noticed that the money spent each month vastly outweighed the cost of healthcare where we were sailing. Sheridan, who is sailing and surfing in Costa Rica, also works as a veterinarian. She looked into insurance that would cover her for all these activities and discovered that "once it begins to cover these things it is upwards of \$1500/year. I can get basic treatment in Costa Rica for that price before flying (home) to Australia for further treatments."

Danielle sailed with her husband and toddler son in Panama and says insurance "was about \$5000 for a family of three. We decided just to wear any medical expenses we might incur." Danielle also warns that some insurance policies may not cover things like contraception and pregnancy, or there may be a lengthy wait period before you are able to file a claim. It pays to read the fine print.

If you choose not to carry insurance, you should still include medical expenses as part of your onboard monthly budget. Medical costs will vary from country to country, but many women find that health care in the developing world is affordable, if not down right cheap. Jan reports that the doctors she saw were all "in the range of \$35-50 USD for a visit." Except a private specialist in NZ she saw to discuss and resolve menopause issues, "she was a bit expensive—about \$200 USD—but worth it." Making sure that you

have money reserved for regular check ups and exams, as well as medical emergencies, will make those doctors visits a little less stressful.

## BE YOUR OWN ADVOCATE

Visits to the gynecologist are always a little nerve-wracking but you shouldn't be intimidated to ask questions. However, it is easy to forget all the concerns you walked into the doctor's office with when you're laying half naked on that crunchy paper with your feet up in stirrups. Take a few moments before your appointment to write down a list of questions you want to discuss with your doctor. Also, take a pen to your appointment and jot down any important answers and information you don't want to forget.

Having copies of your past medical records to show the doctor will automatically fill in a lot of the gaps. Even if you are seeing a non-English speaking doctor, many medical terms and medications are the same in different languages. Carolyn, a nurse, suggests keeping both paper and electronic records. "I carry the DAN (Divers Alert Network) card with my vaccination records and documented history; allergies, surgical, medical, and genetic history. I emailed my Hotmail account with this information, so I can retrieve it anywhere."

It is important when trying to communicate in a foreign language to do a little homework. For instance, the Spanish word *embarazada* sounds like embarrassed but means pregnant. Get those mixed up and it could be an embarrassing situation indeed. With the world at our finger tips via the Internet it is easy to translate important terms to avoid confusion.

Kerstin, who had a reoccurring vaginal cyst that became painfully infected while sailing in remote French Polynesia, went one step further, she enlisted the help of a local. "I tried to push thru it, hoping it would resolve

on its own. When the decision was made to fly to Pape'ete, I got the name of a friend's doctor. My French is not very good and the doctors was so-so, but I was blessed to have a French friend, who is also a sailor and a nurse, meet me in Pape'ete and accompany me. The doctor was incredibly accommodating and sympathetic."

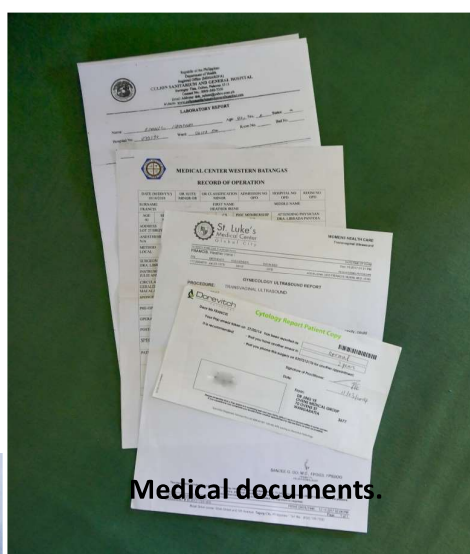
Being your own health advocate does not include playing doctor. Google is a powerful tool, but I can tell you from personal experience that no good will come of trying to cyber-diagnose your ailment. It can be tempting to try to figure things out yourself however, without proper medical training all you're likely to do is cause yourself more stress. Leave the diagnosis to the doctor and use Google to research things like medications and medical terms.

It is important to listen to your body and get to know what is 'normal' for you. That normal may change as you age but trust your instincts; if you feel like something isn't quite right, it probably isn't. If your doctor doesn't listen to your concerns, feel free to get a

second opinion.

## NO BABY ONBOARD

Many people outside the western world have a more traditional view of family and the role women play. Being a woman who has spent her child bearing years consciously childless I have frequently found myself in situations where my choice was questioned. I have had islanders look at me with pity in their eyes and doctors assume I am unable to conceive rather than actively trying not to. However, nothing prepared me for the customs official in Papua New Guinea who leaned over our



arrival paperwork to tell Steve, “You still have time to find a woman who will give you babies. It’s ok, you don’t have to get rid of this wife.”

In the early years I bristled against these comments. Carolyn, who is now 52, admits “Earlier in age I would guiltily end with ‘I love children!’” A common response. Jan, who married at 41 got a little tired of the looks of shock and disbelief. “In some situations where I think I will get a negative reaction, I tell them that we have two sons (Rich has two sons), and I don’t mention that they are not biologically related to me.”

Thankfully, by the time we reached PNG I realized that the people who voiced these opinions found my choices just as foreign as I found theirs. I also realized that we visit places for such a brief time that it is impossible to understand of the intricacies of what is socially expected and acceptable. It is easier to let these kinds of comments and judgements roll off your back rather than let them get under your skin.

## TIME TO PAUSE

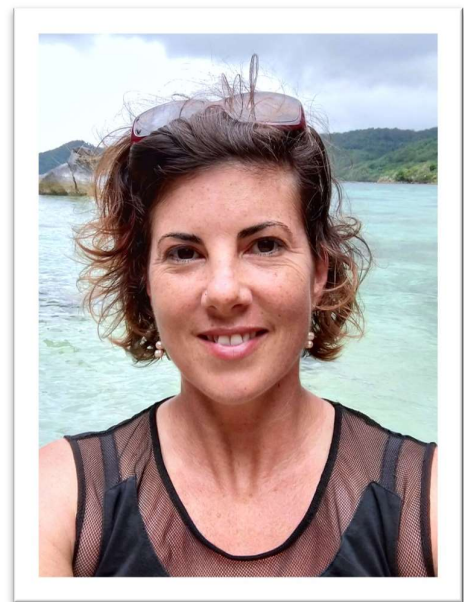
I turned 40 last year, which has opened a whole new chapter when it comes to my health. Now there is the added responsibility of getting yearly mammograms and traversing the seldom spoken about years of perimenopause. I might be years from weathering the high seas of hormone shifts and hot flashes associated with menopause but, like many women, I was curious to know how women sailors cope.

“With the hormonal shifts I rest more” says Carolyn. “I have been saying “No” to high-impact activities. I ask myself: “Is this a real issue or is this my brain overreacting with hormones?” Self-realization helps, as does yoga and meditation.”

Jan was also willing to share her experience. “I was very lucky that my hot flashes were

not too bad, and it really did not affect my regular routine at sea. My biggest issue was the vaginal dryness that came with menopause, and normal lubricants did not really help. Talk about a sex spoiler! Although none of my friends told me about this, when I started asking a few of them about it, I found that they also suffered from the same problem.”

These women have proven again that there is a vast network of sailors out there going through similar experiences who are willing to share, support, and comfort one another. No woman needs to feel alone or embarrassed when it comes to their health and well being. The body is the vessel of the soul, and one that deserves to be well taken care of. Asking for guidance can be difficult, but you wouldn’t leave port without a chart, so why expect to navigate the crazy adventure called life without a little help.



**HEATHER FRANCIS** is originally from Nova Scotia, Canada. She and her Aussie partner, Steve, bought their Newport 41, *Kate*, in California in 2008 and have been sailing fulltime since. They are currently in the Philippines looking for wind. You can follow their adventures at: [www.yachtkate.com](http://www.yachtkate.com)