

INSIDE | Chasing skirts is one way to finish last in love. **Carolyn Hax, E3**

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Health trials are catalyst for women's medical site

By **Mary Beth Faller**
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When a doctor told Michelle King Robson six years ago that she must have a hysterectomy at age 42, she said, "Do whatever you have to."

No second opinion, no questioning.

What followed was a hellish year of horrible menopause symptoms — night sweats, weight gain, dry skin, short-term memory loss — despite a cabinet full of medications. It left Robson distraught and her doctor helpless.

When she regained her health a year later, she vowed to help other women find the information and support they need to take control of their wellness. Her advocacy resulted in a new medical Web site for women, EmpowHer (www.empowher.com).

Launched in February, Scottsdale-based EmpowHer includes health news, a video encyclopedia covering more than 2,000 conditions, a medical dictionary, forums and blogs. On Monday, EmpowHer will launch the first national database of free and low-cost health events.

The speed at which the site has grown surprised Robson, but she knew the need existed.

"Women always have their antennae up for their families, but for ourselves we tend to leave our antennae at the door," Robson says. "We lose that strength. Women need a place to find that information."

Before her hysterectomy, Robson served as chairwoman of the Arizona Character Education Commission (a voluntary position) for eight years. After the operation, she barely could read a book.

"The worst symptom was the short-term memory loss," she says. The surgery was to alleviate suspected endometriosis and other problems. Robson believes she was perimenopausal, but there was no complete test of her hormones.

She took nine medications — three kinds of estrogen, progesterone, thyroid medication, sleeping aids. Finally, her doctor said he didn't know how to help her.

No one knew how desperate she felt.

She read books about menopause, but was unable

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Michelle King Robson offers medical information and forums at www.empowher.com.



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Web site focuses on women's health

EMPOWHER

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to retain anything. Eventually, she was able to get through *Screaming to Be Heard*, by Elizabeth Lee Vliet, a Tucson physician who specializes in women's hormonal issues.

"I was reading it, and I said, 'That's me!'" Robson says. And when she finally got an appointment with Vliet, "it was instant love." Vliet took her off most of the medications and within a week Robson felt much better. She lost weight and regained her energy.

Robson's road to health advocacy began shortly after that. Two pharmaceutical companies filed a motion asking the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to regulate compounding pharmacies, which would have made it difficult for women to get compounded hormones. Robson began an e-mail campaign, organizing consumers and other interested parties to block the drugmakers' action. The case remains undecided after three years, but Robson was energized.

"I was shocked at the response I got," she said. And that's how the site started. It was a great way to bring women together, and they love sharing information.

"That's what I wanted when I was sick. If someone had said, 'I've been there myself,' the validation would

have made me feel a million times better."

Robson, 48, has about two dozen employees. She remains directly involved in much of the content. One of the most popular features is "Ask Michelle," in which visitors can ask Robson anything, publicly or privately.

"The site is for women, and although I always suspected we would have men, I had no idea how many men advocate for their wives and mothers and daughters."

She was moved by a letter from a man whose wife was sent home after a mastectomy with drains attached to her wound. "He was afraid of hurting her," Robson said. "He said, 'How could they think that I could know how to take care of her?' He had no one to talk to."

Women discuss intensely personal issues, such as sexual dysfunction and incontinence, in the forums. Breast cancer and heart disease are popular topics. The staff has received posts from women in 129 countries, although EmpowHer is in English only. Robson hopes the site will be available in Spanish by the end of the year.

Robson at first didn't want to accept advertising money from pharmaceutical companies, but then relented.

"They have some of the best scientists around because they can afford to pay them. And in my own case I ended

up taking an FDA-approved medication. Our job is to give women all the options."

The upcoming health-events database is unique. There is no other nationwide, searchable site like it. Robson knew that thousands of free or low-cost blood-pressure screenings, mammograms, flu shots, seminars, support groups, charity walks and other events are rarely publicized.

The EmpowHer staff has spent months culling events from government agencies such as www.forwomen.gov (Department of Health & Human Services), non-profit groups such as the American Heart Association, hospitals, and businesses such as CVS/pharmacy and Walgreens.

Visitors can search by gender, condition and ZIP code, and they can get notification of specific types of health events, such as a 5-mile walk to raise money for diabetes research, for example.

Providers can post to the site for free and each will get its own page, which can direct visitors to a larger site, or, in the case of small non-profits, act as the main Web site. "There's almost nothing you can't get that's free or low-cost," Robson says. "We're trying to advocate for women."

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