

Documentary by physician filmmakers celebrates the work of Dr. May Cohen



The film is being screened across Canada at various events.

When Dr. May Cohen was inducted into the Canadian Medical Hall of Fame in 2016, two of her colleagues wanted to tell Canadians more about this long-time advocate for women's health. Dr. Cheryl Levitt and Dr. Barbara Lent considered a journal article, but then a cinematographer friend suggested a documentary.

The resulting film, *The Gender Lady: The Fabulous Dr. May Cohen*, has been met with accolades at each of its screenings and won the People's Choice Award when it premiered at the Toronto Jewish Film Festival in May.

It tells the story of an articulate and tireless campaigner for women's health. Dr. May Cohen graduated at the top of her class at the University of Toronto in 1955. Second place went to her husband, Dr. Gerry Cohen. She was one of 14 women in a class who studied a medical curriculum based on what was considered the norm at the time: the 70 kg white male.

After two years as a research fellow in endocrinology, Dr. Cohen started a general practice in Toronto with her husband. In 1977, the two switched to academics, joining the newly formed Faculty of Health Sciences at McMaster University in Hamilton. There, Dr. May Cohen co-founded the Women's Health Office, an academic resource centre for women's health that helped expand the concept beyond gynecological health to examine gender and health. She worked on a national and international level to support abortion rights, LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality in medicine and women's health in the medical curriculum. Dr. Cohen was made a member of the Order of Canada in 2017.

The film also chronicles Dr. May Cohen's childhood, including the influence of her Polish parents who instilled in her a strong commitment to social justice. She spoke only Yiddish until age five and summers were spent at Camp Naivelt, a left-leaning Jewish youth camp near Toronto.

Much of the story is told by Dr. Cohen herself, either through interviews or clips from her investiture into the Hall of Fame. It is a case of "show, don't tell"; in watching Dr. Cohen speak, you can understand how she is not only a person who gets things done, but gets things done without hesitation. She has the hallmarks of a good doctor: practices and contributes to evidence-based medicine, advocates for her patients, bolsters up her patients, medical students and colleagues. It doesn't hurt that Dr. Cohen is immensely likable. She currently lives in Toronto.



Dr. May Cohen in a 2017 interview for the film.

And then there's the other Dr. Cohen, Dr. Gerry Cohen. Their son Eric (also a Dr. Cohen, a cardiologist) speaks about the equality and teamwork in his parent's remarkable personal and professional partnership. The personal partnership brought three sons and more than 65 years of marriage. Dr. Gerry Cohen's support for his wife's initiatives came in many forms: one speaker recalls how before the women in medicine get-togethers at their house, Dr. Gerry Cohen would come home early to help clear up the dog's droppings in the yard. He died in 2017, and the film is dedicated to him.

Because the story is told through first person recollections, there is no descent into the maudlin, no suggestion of the sole super-human that haunts so many biographies. These are level-headed witnesses recalling living through times of change; change brought about through optimism, education, scientific examination, well-reasoned communication and a lot of work.

The film moves chronologically but also through themes flowing into one another, such as how the abortion debate highlighted a need for more information on and understanding of women's sexuality.

The first-time filmmakers are impressive in their own right. Director and producer Dr. Levitt is a professor in McMaster's department of family medicine. Co-director and co-producer Dr. Lent is a family physician in London, Ontario and professor emeritus at Western University. Both worked with Dr. May Cohen on numerous projects promoting women's health and gender equity in medicine in Canada and internationally.

Dr. Lent told the *Medical Post* that an important message of the film is how your social values impact how you interact with patients and others in the world. She said Dr. Cohen just kept working for what she believes in, and that is an inspiration.

With her name on more than 120 papers, Dr. Levitt has done her share of research, but she said that the details involved in documentary-making was unlike any other research she'd experienced before. Hunting down images was one thing, but getting approval to use them was another. Dr. Levitt told a story

about one photo that would have cost \$25,000 to use. (Spoiler: they didn't use it, which was fine with Dr. Cohen, who never liked the photo). In all, the experience of making the documentary was a good one, and Dr. Levitt encourages other physicians to learn how to do it, so more stories can be told.

Along with cinematographer Zoe Dirse, the filmmakers worked with editor Mary Kainer and musician Kirk Elliott. Executive producers are Dirse and musician Sharon Hampson of Sharon & Bram.

Funding and other support came from various sources, including the Department of Family medicine at McMaster University and the Federation of Medical Women in Canada. The film was shown at their annual meeting in Ottawa in September.

The premiere screening at the Toronto Jewish Film Festival was so popular that it sold out in 36 hours, and then the filmmakers were inundated with emails. "I had no idea the impact that May and Gerry had on their patients," Dr. Levitt said.

Dr. Levitt is working to get the film shown to medical students, women's studies programs and others. "I hope it can mobilize people to learn about gender issues," she said.

The next screening will be held on November 28 at the Ontario College of Family Physicians scientific assembly in Toronto. More information about the film is available at maycohen.com