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Preface to *The Accidental Sisterhood*

{ The Untold Story of Untold Millions }

There's a story that women everywhere know but is rarely ever told. It takes place at a movie or at a mall, sometimes in a boardroom, and often in a bedroom. The setting can be anywhere. Only the plot never varies: the business or the moment at hand can't wait – and neither can your bladder.

And when the story is told, it often concludes with words like these: "I want to teach aerobics again. I want to play in the park with my children. I want to have sex with my husband and not worry that I'll have an urge to go, and when we do make love I want to feel something more in return. I want my life back."

Then, there's the other side of the story. Go into any one of the large drugstore chains and you'll find a sign above an aisle that says "Incontinence." There, right next to the menstrual products, are shelves of super-absorbent, pricey incontinence

pads, liners, and briefs clearly and conveniently displayed for all who belong to . . . *The Accidental Sisterhood*.

Active, healthy women should not have to depend on these products, yet, judging by the size of the market for them, millions do.

{ *Nothing to Sneeze At* }

Helping people hide their embarrassment is big business. Annual sales of adult incontinence pads and diapers run to about six billion dollars. Most of those who use these products – by a significant margin – are women. In their advertising, and to their credit, manufacturers of adult absorbent products do advise consumers to see a health-care professional about their bladder-control problems. Nevertheless, the open and candid way in which these products are now advertised, in print and on television, suggests that they are a woman’s only solution to her problem, but, in fact, they are not.

The Accidental Sisterhood numbers 20 million American women . . . we think. It’s probably more than that; the estimated numbers are all over the map. The National Institutes of Health report that 50 percent of all women have occasional urinary incontinence, with about 20 percent of women over the age of 75 experiencing daily urinary incontinence.¹

Another study, funded by an international pharmaceutical

¹*Medical Encyclopedia: Stress Incontinence*. National Institutes of Health, www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000891.htm.


company and reported in *The New York Times*, found that 55 percent of women in their 80's are incontinent, and for women ages 30 to 39, 28 percent leak urine at least once a month.² Given these findings, it's anyone's guess what the absolute numbers are.

Why can't we be more precise than that? We can't because we don't know.



{ *The Inconvenient Ones* }

It's estimated that more than half of the elderly people in nursing homes are there because their families can't deal with their incontinence (both urinary and fecal). It's the number one reason for adult placement in nursing homes in the United States. No one should want to end her life wearing a diaper.



We don't know the full extent of female bladder-control problems for a couple of reasons. The social stigma attached to it is a painful reality for women who live every day with the mortifying possibility of wetting through their clothes, of having an odor, or of having to flee the dinner table for fear of leaking. Nor is it something they want to talk about with friends and family. Funny, isn't it? Women who wouldn't hesitate to bring up almost any other personal subject when with close friends would never mention their own bladder-control problems.

Many women – and men, as well – don't even tell health-

² "Enduring Incontinence In Silence," Science Times, *The New York Times*, October 25, 2005

care professionals because leaking urine is such a potent cultural taboo. *We know this because only one in 12 incontinent people sees a health-care professional for help.*³ Either they fear that the problem wouldn't be taken seriously enough to warrant treatment (which is often the case), or they're in denial: "I'm too young to have this problem." "It happens only when I exercise." "I always leak a little when I have to go real bad. I didn't know I had a problem."

Not only do many people not want to talk about or recognize the problem, but according to another recent study reported in the *Times*, as many as two-thirds of them aren't doing anything to manage it except, perhaps, using absorbent pads.⁴ Many women endure urinary incontinence for years before they mention it to health-care professionals.

The sad fact of the matter is that many women with bladder-control problems accept their fate. They believe, or have been led to believe, that it's a normal consequence of having a baby or two, of getting older, or for just being a woman.

Well, ladies, it's *not* your lot in life. It's not a natural consequence of having babies, of growing older, or of being a woman, and you *can* do something about it.

If you belong to *The Accidental Sisterhood*, it's safe to say you have great strength in numbers. But you have yet to flex your muscles to demand a greater level of concern for your problem.

³ "Why Incontinence Need Not Be a Problem." www.pdrhealth.com, a service of Thomson Healthcare.

⁴ *The New York Times*. Op. cit.

You shouldn't have to stay home and away from other people or near a bathroom because of the uncontrollable urge to urinate. You shouldn't have to fear wetting yourself when you laugh, sneeze, or exercise. You shouldn't have to avoid sexual intercourse because it's embarrassing, maybe uncomfortable, or it's gotten so you don't feel satisfied anymore. And you shouldn't have to worry that any of this may start happening to you sometime tomorrow or the day afterward. You can learn to flex your muscles, literally, to change your life, by yourself, for yourself.

The Accidental Sisterhood will help you understand what's wrong and how to make it right in a matter of a few weeks, or even sooner – and keep it that way for good.

Welcome to *The Accidental Sisterhood*

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{ *An Intimate Connection* }

*What does bladder control have to do with sex? A great deal. They both depend upon an innermost and intimate part of your body, one that most women know little about, yet that deeply influences the quality of their lives. It is, you will find, the central theme of *The Accidental Sisterhood*.*



{ Introduction to Empowerment }

The Accidental Sisterhood is for women whose bladders give them no peace.

The Accidental Sisterhood is for women who leak urine when they laugh (or cough or sneeze or lift a growing child).

The Accidental Sisterhood is for sexually active women who wonder why sex isn't as satisfying as it used to be.

The Accidental Sisterhood is for every woman who, maybe like you, wants answers and a solution now for the problem she faces today, or may face tomorrow.


First, you should understand why you're having a problem: *The Accidental Sisterhood* will answer your questions. Second, The Accidental Sisterhood Progressive Plan will show you how to

correct or prevent most problems – but not *every* problem. We will discuss other options for you, and, in the end, you’ll have the information you need to know to make the right choice.



{ *Warning Signs* }

Please be advised that if you have pain when you urinate or find blood in your urine you need to see a health-care professional as soon as you can. They could be symptoms of more serious conditions that must be treated before any other therapy is considered.



The Accidental Sisterhood shares more than a common experience. It goes deeper than that, to the core of every woman – her pelvic floor.

Maybe you have, or maybe you haven’t, heard about it before, this “pelvic floor,” it being down there and inside. Even if you have, its significance is still unknown to many women, and for some, it may be unmentionable.

Unknown, maybe. But unmentionable?

Not to us, and it certainly shouldn’t be to you either. On the contrary, get set for empowerment. You are about to discover the pelvic floor in all of its anatomical glory. You will understand what it does for you, why it sometimes doesn’t work as well as it should, and what you can do to make it fit and healthy again – and keep it that way. You’ll learn practical techniques to harness the real and



potential power of your pelvic floor and get it back in shape.

“I don’t get it,” you might say. “The pelvic floor? It sounds like a construction site.” Well, in a way it is. The pelvic floor is important to all of us because it’s a fundamental part of the conjoined and coordinated framework of bone and muscle that enables us to stand upright and make our way in the world as human beings.

The pelvic floor helps define us – and not insignificantly so – as male or as female.

It occupies the center of our gravity, holds sway over balance and posture, and is indispensable to the health and functioning of our sexual organs.

It’s a complex arrangement of muscles, ligaments, and connective tissue that spans the pelvic opening between our legs.

It supports a woman’s pelvic organs – the bladder, the vagina, the uterus, the rectum – and their pathways from her body.

It makes way for the birth of a child.

And it governs urinary and fecal continence.

But as vital as it is, a woman’s pelvic floor is also vulnerable – susceptible to bladder overactivity, urinary incontinence, and sexual dysfunction: symptoms of an underlying disorder, signs that signify membership in *The Accidental Sisterhood*.

Treating pelvic floor disorder is the core of our practices in female urology and women's health physical therapy. We see women at all stages of the disorder, from a few drops of urine escaping with a little exercise to several soaked pads a day. We see women who can't leave their homes for fear of a sudden and uncontrollable urge to urinate. We see women who no longer achieve a satisfying sexual climax and who often avoid intercourse because of their bladder concerns. And at the extreme, when a pelvic organ loses the support of the pelvic floor, we see it protruding downward between the legs. These problems are correctable, and – for the millions of women who are unaware of what may be in store for them as they have their children and grow older – they are preventable. We repeat: *they are preventable*.



{ *The Bump You Wish That Wasn't* }

The condition characterized by the collapse of pelvic organs into the vagina and sometimes protruding out of the vagina is known as prolapse.



For a long time, correction meant surgery, except for a woman's sexual dysfunction. Even if she bravely raised that subject, nothing much was done for her in any event. But today we can do something for this and other problems through pelvic floor therapy, an alternative, conservative approach that has become the first line of treatment for pelvic floor disorder. As you'll soon see, its techniques are at the heart of our Accidental Sisterhood Progressive Plan – The Sisterhood Plan.



Until now, the authors' problem has been that we saw only one patient at a time. At that rate, we weren't making much of a dent in either problem: encouraging more women to seek therapy for a correctable problem or getting the word out to other women to prevent it. That's why we've made it our mission to reach out to you and every woman through this book, through other instructional media, and through our Web site, *www.AccidentalSisterhood.com*.

But even more critical than educating women about pelvic floor disorder is the need to offer a workable, non-surgical solution for it. It's what this book is all about. The Sisterhood Plan is a comprehensive approach to pelvic floor therapy that we've developed for our patients – and for you. It will, when you embrace it, make you better in ways that you may not have thought still possible. You can expect results in about four to eight weeks, and in some cases even sooner.

And so The Sisterhood Plan is for you if you live according to your bladder's time schedule, if you laugh and leak, if you only remember what sexual gratification used to be like, and you're among The Accidental Sisterhood who *know* they have a problem and simply won't accept it as your way of life.

And so The Sisterhood Plan is for you if you can't control your bladder, if going to the gym is out of the question, if you're finding that the feeling is not quite the way it used to be deep in the delta of Venus, and you're among The Accidental Sisterhood who'd rather *not think* about it but really know they *should*.

And so The Sisterhood Plan is for you if you're *not yet* counted among The Accidental Sisterhood . . . and you don't ever want to be.

Up ahead in this book you'll find what you need to know to stay dry and in control of your bladder and, once again, to savor sexual intimacy. Start down that path right now if you like. Go directly to **The Accidental Sisterhood Progressive Plan: Getting to Work**, and get to work. *But, please, you really should read the book all the way through.* You won't regret it. It won't take you long to find out what the problem is all about and how you, or your sister, your mother, your best friend, or even your daughter can change what shouldn't be any woman's fate. You need to know. They need to know.





A PROMISE TO KEEP

The Accidental Sisterhood Progressive Plan is a response to an enormous problem facing many women – a problem that is too often ignored and vastly underestimated. We believe that every woman can benefit from it . . . that *you* can benefit from it.

You have in your possession a unique way to correct or prevent problems arising from disorders of the pelvic floor. It is a *detailed* and *doable* plan to regain control of your bladder and your life.

This book is about healing and strengthening your pelvic floor – everything about it, not just the symptoms of incontinence or urgency. This book is about *you* regaining authority over a fundamental part of *your* body that you might otherwise have felt was beyond your control.

You found that you *can* learn to make your bladder behave. You *can* control the muscles of your pelvic floor to improve or cure urinary incontinence and urgency. You *can* make your sex life better.

For the vast majority of women who must struggle every day with these issues, The Sisterhood Plan will not only free them from urgency and wetting, it will, like coming upon an unexpected treasure, strengthen their physical response to sex.

Women have always had to work harder, often on their own, to get where they wanted to be. And when they got there, they knew it *wasn't* by accident.

But we don't expect you to go it all alone. We're here for you. We'll work with you for as long as you need us – for more information, for encouragement, for help.

Contact us through our Web site, www.AccidentalSisterhood.com. We want to know how you've done on The Sisterhood Plan and what you think about it. Tell us how we can improve our program, how we might help others.

You can help, too, as we've already suggested. Share your knowledge with others. Talk to other women about these issues and, yes, even how you've learned to master yours. Tell your best friend, your mother. Tell your daughter. Above all, tell your sisters . . . *The Accidental Sisterhood*.



A PROMISE TO KEEP