

Awareness of gender in healthcare

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Issues relating to gender and health are quite intriguing. When interacting with patients one observes that men and women have different health-related concerns, deal with situations differently, present with different complaints and so on. On attempting to discuss practice-related gender issues with colleagues, most do not see the relevance to their daily practice. Within academia, the feedback would generally be that outside of the well recognised focussed specialities relating to male and female-specific medicine and treatment, there is nothing significant worth further investigation.

Men and women are different in many ways; they are different physically and psychologically. Women and men go through different physiological stages in life, face different health related situations, which in turn have an impact on their health related behaviour and possibly health related outcomes. It is surprising that in other areas, especially those relating to marketing and commerce, gender issues are well researched and populations targeted appropriately. However, in health care we lag significantly behind.

The World Health Organisation recognises the importance of gender in health care and is very active in promoting health across genders, identifying inequalities and addressing them. It has an extensive programme dedicated to this and also provides resources to *'..increase health professionals' awareness of the role of gender norms, values, and inequality in perpetuating disease, disability, and death, and to promote societal change with a view to eliminating gender as a barrier to good health.'*¹

The European Commission has recognised the significant gap in research related to gender issues and through its research and innovation programme, Horizon 2020 has pledged that *"Gender will be addressed as a cross-cutting issue in order to rectify imbalances between women and men, and to integrate a gender dimension in research and innovation programming and content."*²

In 2011 the EU established an expert group 'Innovations Through Gender' to provide the research community with the appropriate tools with which to address sex and gender research.³ One of the directors of this group, Ineke Klinge,

has contributed to this issue of the Journal by providing a very interesting overview of the work being done.

Initially the intention was to focus strictly on medicines and gender. To highlight differences relating to pharmacokinetics, genetics, medicines consumption patterns and medicines related behaviour. However, this issue has evolved to address broader topics which should interest professionals with a wider range of interests.

Practitioners are strongly encouraged to be sensitised to the differences between men and women and treat them accordingly and researchers to conduct studies which actively seek to investigate gender-dependent health-related differences; such studies need to be appropriately designed and statistically powered. Policy makers are urged to encourage and support these initiatives and introduce the appropriate infrastructure to make such interventions possible. Emerging evidence suggests that many differences do exist, and some of these differences will have an impact on the way we practice, if we are to provide a person-centric approach. Once incorporated into our daily practice and in policy we will offer a better service to our patients resulting in improved health outcomes. However, more work is needed to identify the most appropriate gender-sensitive targets.

The aim of this issue of The Journal is to increase awareness about gender in health care. I hope that readers will find it interesting and they will be increasingly sensitised to this aspect of health care. As always, we encourage and welcome the feedback of our readers.

References

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