

Importance of gender equity in health

EMHF Background Information

Men's health is in no way more or less important than the health of women or children, but it is different. Men have different health needs, are affected differently by various diseases and illnesses, and access services in different patterns and for different reasons.

'It is important not to directly compare male and female health. Resources are needed for the development of better health services for both groups. And although the needs of both are different, it is clear that men's and women's health issues are closely intertwined.'

Peggy Maguire, President, European Institute of Women's Health

Over the last 30 years, women have rightly argued that women have been poorly served by a male-dominated health service. Health policies and practices must change to reflect the specific needs of women, say women's advocates.

Yet it is now becoming increasingly clear that, perhaps surprisingly, men have not benefited from a male-dominated health service either. Men need a new approach to health care – one that takes into account the needs of their gender.

Gender matters in health care

Understanding gender is crucial to understanding male health issues – it helps to explain, for instance, why so many men take risks with their health. Even today, traditional attitudes towards gender remain surprisingly strong and prevalent. Boys and young men continue to be socialised to be tough and strong, to appear in control and to take risks. This creates dangerous behaviours such as fast driving and cigarette smoking.

Gender roles also make it harder for young males to ask for help. Indeed, men often believe that they should tough out illness for as long as they can – rather than admit to what feels like a weakness.

The emphasis placed on being rational also makes many men feel disconnected from their bodies and their physical needs. Men often speak about their bodies as if they were machines and think about illness in terms of the failure of a particular body part.

The *British Medical Journal* has suggested that the 'the development and maintenance of a heterosexual male identity often requires the talking of risks that are seriously hazardous to health.'¹ Not only are men at high risk of dying prematurely from occupational accidents or disease but also at special risk through homicide, traffic accidents and dangerous sports. The need to be seen as 'hard' also has implications for men's mental health, preventing them from taking health promotion seriously and inhibiting them from seeing a doctor when problems do arise. Thus 'greater sensitivity to sex and gender is needed in medical research, service delivery and wider social policies,' the article concludes. And at a recent World Health Organization seminar, delegates from 28 European countries called for a new understanding of gender and health. This understanding should reflect both male and female health needs and help in achieving gender equity: 'Mainstreaming gender in health ... promotes the

integration of gender concerns into the formulation, monitoring, and analysis of policies, programmes and projects, with the objective of ensuring that men and women achieve the highest health status,² delegates stated.

It is important to understand that gender is not biological. But nor is it an identity that can be easily put on or taken off. Gender roles are primarily socially and culturally determined and, because they have existed for a long time, are very difficult to change.

This means that health policymakers and professionals must improve their understanding of male gender roles and seek to develop and deliver services that are aimed at men as they are – and not as some might wish them to be. For example, as men are not socialised to reveal weaknesses publicly, providing them with ways of accessing health information anonymously and confidentially, eg the Internet or telephone helplines, may be more useful than clinics. Health promotion materials that use metaphors which are relevant to men, such as those comparing bodies to machines, may also prove more successful.

Explaining and illuminating men's health needs: the EMHF

Not only are men health needs different to those of women or, indeed, children, but they are also imperfectly understood. It is precisely for these reasons that the European Men' Health Forum (EMHF) was founded. The EMHF's mission is to raise awareness of male health issues, to campaign for change and to bring all interested groups together to work to improve male health throughout Europe.

The EMHF fully supports equal opportunities in all its work and is committed to the improvement in the health of women and children, as well as men. Nor does the EMHF believe that men's health should be improved by transferring resources from other groups.

Sources

1. Doyal L. Sex, gender and health: the need for a new approach. *BMJ* 2001;323:1061–1063
2. Gender Mainstreaming Health Policies in Europe. WHO Seminar, 2001

EMHF: tackling inequalities in men's health across Europe

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