

NEWS RELEASE

FEMALE GPs RATE HIGHER IN CARING FOR PATIENTS WITH DEPRESSION

BLACK DOG INSTITUTE



Male General Practitioners (GPs) may not like the comparison, but female GPs are perceived to be more caring when seeing a patient suffering depression.

According to a Black Dog Institute study published in the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, female GPs are likely to listen more than male counterparts and write longer referrals.

In defence of male doctors, the study points out that, if these findings are valid, such differences in the care of patients could just reflect general gender differences.

It could be a ‘men from mars, women from Venus’ scenario, in which the female doctors wish to spend more time in discussion versus male GPs cutting to the chase and making rapid technical decisions, with the female GP viewed as more caring in consequence, according to the study

Professor Gordon Parker, Executive Director of the Black Dog Institute, said the objective of the study was to determine whether anecdotal claims of gender difference in the treatment of depression by GPs actually existed in real world practice.

He said that as part of the first study, the Institute looked at referral letters and responses from 100 GPs to a specialised psychiatric depression clinic. They were analysed by word count and gender of the referring GP.

In a second study, the Institute had 517 people participate in a web-based survey which examined the impact of GP gender in terms of management nuances.

With the first study, female GPs used three times more words compared to a male GP in writing referrals. “On qualitative examination, male referrers were more likely to write brief ‘Please assess and manage’ referrals,” said Professor Parker.

The second web-based study didn’t improve the scorecard for male GPs.

In fact, it showed that when dealing with patients suffering depression, male (compared to female) GPs were less likely to be rated as caring and listening, were rated as showing poorer communication skills and were less likely to seek information than expected by the patient.

Following are the questions/results from study participants:

	Gender of practitioner	
	Male	Female
When you spoke to your doctor about depression, did you find him/her to be caring?	66.9%	86.0%
Did you feel that your doctor listened to you?	76.7%	87.5%
Of those prescribed medication, percentage of those expecting more information to be obtained prior to prescribing	68.0%	50.4%
Referral to a mental health specialist	53.4%	68.3%

The gender balance was somewhat corrected by a subsidiary analysis indicating that male patients reported comparable care levels from both male and female GPs. On the other hand, female patients rated female GPs as distinctly more caring than male GPs.

Professor Parker said the Institute planned to investigate the findings further, particularly in pursuing the amount of time male and female GPs spend with depressed patients, and in developing their ‘care plans’. He said clinical depression was recognised as a highly prevalent condition and in recent decades had attracted an extraordinary number of studies examining the differing treatments.

“If the gender of the GP does influence the assessment and management of those with depressive conditions, quantifying the therapeutic impact of such differences may enable the design of strategies and tools to improve early medical education,” he said.

MEDIA INQUIRIES: Please contact Ian Dose (M) 0419 618 606 or email: i.dose@unsw.edu.au