

Improving Women's Health: Asking hard questions and questioning assumptions

How does the social construction of gender impact women's health?

Language

Beliefs

Knowledge production

Authoritative Knowledge

Emergence of dominant accepted beliefs

Often better at explaining the world

Associated with a stronger power base

Dismissal of other ways of knowing

"The power in authoritative knowledge is not that it is correct, but that it counts"

Persuasive because it seems natural, reasonable

Authoritative knowledge devalues other forms of knowledge

Self knowledge

Traditional knowledge systems

Examples within western health care

Recommendations change, authoritative knowledge remains

Authoritative knowledge is transmitted and solidified through

Educational systems

All media forms

Professionals

Institutions

Economic power

Women themselves as participants

So, how does this affect women's health and well-being?

Some examples from this course

Obesity

Mental Illness

Reproductive control

Childbirth

Tonight we add another issue Menopause

Menopause- a change in life

Loosing femininity?

Value of women as reproducers

Youth, beauty, worth tied together

Disregard of historical presence of women past childbearing years

Medicalizing Menopause

Cessation of menses

Associated with temporary symptoms

Uncertain process....varied length of time, perimenopausal phase, loss of the protective benefits of estrogen.

Medical treatment: estrogen replacement

Recommended for long-term use

Role of estrogens

Reproductive functions

Ovaries

Uterus

Breasts

Cardiovascular

Bone density

Others:GI, Brain, Lung, Skin...

Medical recommendations despite conflicting research

Women's Health Initiative

Large scale study funded by NIH in 1993

Randomized, controlled trial to evaluate effects of ERT over long-term

Compared with the placebo, estrogen plus progestin resulted in:

Increased risk of heart attack

Increased risk of stroke

Increased risk of blood clots

Increased risk of breast cancer

Reduced risk of colorectal cancer

Fewer fractures

No protection against mild cognitive impairment and increased risk of dementia (study included only women 65 and older)

Social Construction of Gender and Menopause

Assumed menopause as disease

Needs to be treated

Insufficient research accepted because consistent with societal assumptions

Power of asking hard questions and good research

Lessons learned

Need better science

Response to new data

Question assumptions
Change can happen

What is better science?
Who is doing the research?
Devalues other forms of wisdom and knowledge production
Asserts belief that everything is knowable or quantifiable within a biomedical worldview

Breast Cancer

Organizing- example of successful grassroots campaigns
Safe to support “pink ribbon”,
Whitewashing environmental risks- who funds research?
Persistent disparities
Victim and/or survivor

But do we really know???
Mixed recommendations
controversy about screening guidelines and method for screening.

Bad Sugar- Diabetes

Cardiovascular Disease and Women
Assumptions of who has heart disease
Intersections of race/class/gender
Oppression
Access to care
“Lifestyle”

Life expectancy
Women live average 5 years longer than men
Poorer quality of life
More morbidity/disability

Quality of life and death
Meaningful life
Integrated health care
Advanced directives
Difficult discussions
Hospice care (33% who qualify use)

What is women's health from a Feminist perspective?

Consideration of women's health within the context of how women live their lives

collectively and individually.

Argues for a social model rather than the more constrained biomedical model.

Considers health as influenced by the intersection of sexism, racism, class, nation and gender, within a framework that acknowledges the role of oppression as it affects women and their health as individuals and as a group.

Components of a Feminist Perspective In Women's Health

With women not for women

Uses heterogeneity as an assumption rather than homogeneity

Seeks to minimize or expose power imbalances

Rejects androcentric models as normative

Challenges the medicalization of health care and the pathologizing of normal physiologic processes

Seeks social, political change

Importance of Activism

Asks hard questions

Critical look at reality

Sense of power

Informs general public

With caveats

Challenges economic lobbyists (pharmaceuticals, professional organizations)

Can influence research agendas

Use your civic power

102 years since right to vote (1920)

58 years since Civil Rights Act (1964)

49 years since right to safe abortion (1973)

36 years since sexual harassment on job identified as discrimination (1986)

28 years since Violence Against Women Act (1994)

26 years since gender equality for college athletic programs (1996)

8 years expanded health insurance coverage (2014)

Live a purposeful life

Five factoids to remember....

Love yourself/love your body

Take responsibility for your health

Intimacy with enthusiastic consent

Question the status quo

Get involved in creating change

Transforming Women's Health

Commit to something.....

Use your economic power

Consider your options

There is power and strength.....

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world.
Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

-Margaret Mead