

Analysis of the risk of gender bias in medicine

Gunilla Risberg¹ Eva E Johansson¹ Katarina Hamberg¹

¹ Section of Family Medicine, Umea, Sweden

Gender is more than biological differences between women and men. A gender perspective in medicine implies that living conditions, positions in society and societal expectations about 'femininity' and 'masculinity' are to be considered along with biology in professional relations as well as when theorising about women and men. Unawareness of gender issues among health care professionals can lead to gender bias. In this paper the risk of gender bias in medicine is analyzed in relation to assumptions about difference/sameness and equity/inequity between women and men. Open-ended answers and comments in a questionnaire to physician teachers about gender, and the results of our earlier studies on gender bias are used as empirical data. Our analysis illustrates that gender bias in medicine can arise from assuming sameness and/or equity between women and men when there are genuine differences to consider in biology and disease as well as in life experiences and living conditions. But it can also arise from assuming differences when there are none, when dichotomous stereotypes about women and men are understood as genuine reality. Nowadays there is a reduced risk of gender bias originating from lack of knowledge of biological differences between women and men since such facts are included in medical education. The risk of gender bias caused by gendered stereotypes and unawareness of differences in life conditions and experiences still needs to be highlighted. To avoid such bias we suggest that heads of departments and clinics strongly encourage gender research and gender educational programs for faculty members.