Development of an Undergraduate Course in Gender Issues in Health Care

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This paper describes the development of an undergraduate course in gender issues in health care coordinated by an instructor from the college of pharmacy. The goals of this course were to create an awareness among the students of the many issues and dimensions of women's health and to expand the perception that women's health issues are solely gynecological. The importance of studying women's health issues is discussed and course objectives, outline, resources and assignments are presented. Student response to the course has been favorable. Since its initial offering, the course has been taught at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. It is anticipated that this course might serve to stimulate future courses, or the incorporation of these topics into other classes within colleges of pharmacy.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to describe the development and implementation of a multi-disciplinary undergraduate course in women’s health issues coordinated by an instructor from the college of pharmacy. It is hoped that this course might serve as a guide for future development of courses within colleges of pharmacy by offering suggestions for key topics, readings and ideas for assignments.

In colleges of pharmacy, students learn what they need to know in order to be a competent health care provider—pharmacology, therapeutics and pharmacokinetics. Yet, the knowledge of pharmacotherapy is based primarily upon studies of men’s responses to medications. Pharmacy students must learn to cautiously apply the results of such research to female patients and be aware of potential differences in therapy or response to that treatment. Once in practice, pharmacists must use their knowledge of disease states and of medications in order to decide upon the appropriate treatment for a specific patient. They must also understand and address each patient’s specific needs to provide proper care. Because women may require or respond differently to treatment and because women’s needs differ from men’s, pharmacy students must understand and be sensitive to those differences in order to care for their future patients.

In general, women’s health issues are important to identify and study for several reasons including the fact that there has been a lack of focus on women’s health concerns in clinical trials as well as a lack of women included in those clinical trials. Rodin and Ickovics (1) provide a review of the history of women’s health research and suggest further avenues for exploration. They propose that women have unique health concerns which have not been adequately addressed and that women are affected disproportionately when it comes to certain disease states. Specific examples of such disease states include diabetes, anemia, respiratory and gastro-intestinal problems, rheumatoid arthritis and systemic lupus erythematosus. Finally, women can be affected differently than men, as in the case of angina prior to myocardial infarction (2). The research that has been done on major disease states, while invaluable, leave questions about the findings’ applicability to women.

Rosser (3) underscores these ideas by pointing out that the biases in clinical cardiac research have become imbedded systematically into management of disease, which leads to inequitable treatment of women. She also suggests that studies that have been conducted in women's health have not focused on women, rather on how diseases they carry affect others. For example, much of the research on women and HIV/AIDS focuses on women as vectors for transmission to men or to fetuses (4).

Women utilize health care differently than men, seeking health care one and a half times as often as men (5). Verbrugge (6) suggests that women suffer from more acute problems which are serious, but not life threatening, when compared to men. Men, on the other hand, are sick less often, but have higher rates of chronic illnesses which are leading causes of death. The apparent higher rate of morbidity in women is also affected by demographic changes in the...
The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has begun a massive research campaign via the Women’s Health Initiative (WHI), to address critical issues related to women’s health, but data will be unavailable for many years. The initiation of these studies serves to underscore the need to be aware of the lack of information in this area. Understanding the information needs of women is essential to establishing and maintaining a mutually profitable relationship with female patients. Offering women’s health issues as a course or as topics in the current curriculum through the college of pharmacy will provide students with essential information for their future practice.

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

The gender issues in health care course was implemented in the spring of 1995 through the center for women’s studies and gender research at the University of Florida. It was a course offered to all undergraduates, but was taken primarily by Arts and Sciences students. The primary goals of the course were to create an awareness among the students of the many issues and dimensions of women’s health and to expand the perception that women’s health issues are primarily gynecological. To this end, it was designed to provide an overview of gender issues in health with a multidisciplinary approach. The specific objectives of the course are listed in Table I. Based on these objectives, faculty members across campus and members of the community were recruited to present lectures in their area of expertise. Faculty members presented current research in the areas of access to care, violence against women, women as care givers, living arrangements of elderly Latina women, and HIV prevention. Other lecturers shared their proficiency in the areas of nutrition, obesity and body image, mental health, women as health care professionals, menopause, osteoporosis and hormone replacement therapy, cancer, global and cultural issues, health related communication, prescription of psychotropic medications, women as health care providers, violence against women and epidemiology. See Appendix A for a full listing of the course topics and relevant readings. Unlike other courses that may be offered in this area, this course attempted to incorporate and balance the lay as well as the scientific perspectives on gender issues in health care. Topics of specific interest to pharmacy students, such as pharmacologic and pharmacokinetic differences were included. Additionally, the multidisciplinary approach facilitated deeper understanding of the issues at hand by combining rather than relying on a purely sociological or biomedical approach. Future courses or lectures within colleges of
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Table II. Selected World Wide Web sites on women’s health

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Forum for Women’s Health</td>
<td>Offers information, advice and suggestions to help women deal with their health concerns.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.healthwire.com/women">www.healthwire.com/women</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask a Woman Doctor</td>
<td>Women physicians answer questions about women’s health.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.healthwire.com/ask.html">www.healthwire.com/ask.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Women’s Resource Center</td>
<td>A national clearinghouse for information on drug and mental health issues for women.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nwrc.org">www.nwrc.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Space</td>
<td>A web site for young women and girls which provides information about growing up relationships, sexuality and health.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.womenspace.com">www.womenspace.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Medical Health Page</td>
<td>Provides information on current medical issues and recent publications in women’s health.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.best.com/sirlou/wmhp.html">www.best.com/sirlou/wmhp.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s Health Interactive</td>
<td>Offers an interactive learning environment for women to proactively learn about their health and health related issues.</td>
<td><a href="http://www.womens-health.com">www.womens-health.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defense Women’s Health Resource Clearinghouse</td>
<td>Clearinghouse of women’s health related issues and information</td>
<td><a href="http://www.4women.org">www.4women.org</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The course also included two hours per week of lecture and one hour per week of discussion covering both lectures and reading assignments. A primary focus of the course was to involve students in class discussion which would serve as an integration between lecture and reading, and would provide continuity in a course where many of the lectures were given by guest experts with different teaching styles. Students worked in teams of three to lead class discussion each week and were required to prepare questions they felt were important to pose to the class. These student discussion leaders were vital to the success of the discussions. Because many of the students were first year students, some assistance on the part of the instructor was required to stimulate the appropriate level of discussion. To encourage discussion and help the student discussion leaders, class participation was included in the students’ grades.

The semester was planned according to a progression from general to specific topics building upon the knowledge presented first. For example, the general topics of access to health care and epidemiology were used to frame the content presented later on specific disease states including heart disease, cancer and AIDS.

COURSE FORMAT

ASSIGNMENTS

Exams

Both a midterm and final exam were used to evaluate students’ comprehension of the materials presented through lectures and readings. The exams included both objective and essay questions to cover the range of information presented while allowing the student to demonstrate ability to synthesize the material. Some lecturers provided exam questions based on their lectures, however the course coordinator was responsible for preparing a final version of each exam.

Health Issue Portfolio (HIP)

To meet the objectives of the course concerning the media, a project was designed to facilitate student’s thinking about the role media plays in defining, disseminating and controlling information about health and disease. The health issue portfolio was a semester-long assignment for which groups of students compiled a notebook on the health issue of their choice. Students were asked to include articles and advertisements from lay press sources and from community or other resources. A short paper required students to describe their findings, identify trends over the course of the semester and give a brief comparative analysis of the presentation of information in the lay versus scientific press. Topics chosen by the students included AIDS, violence against women, women as health care professionals, eating disorders, cancer, advertising and menopause.

Student response to this project was very favorable and the resulting portfolios were well done. Students presented their portfolios to the class at the end of the semester. Examples of students’ creativity was evident in their completed portfolios and presentations. For example, one group conducted an informal survey which they developed to address the impact of advertising on women’s perceptions of beauty and health. They were surprised by their results...
which showed many women to be strongly influenced by advertising for women’s products. One woman in the group focusing on AIDS had lost several close friends and relatives to the disease and spoke about her involvement in AIDS activism as well as her daily struggle to help care for the people in her life. The personal presentation certainly made an impact upon the class, bringing home the consequences of a disease usually regarded as affecting only others.

Term Paper (Optional)

Students were offered the option of writing a term paper to satisfy a University writing requirement rather than participating in the HIP project. These students selected a topic of interest to them based on the material presented in the course and prepared a 10-15 page term paper. Topics selected mirrored those chosen by students completing the HIP project and included: AIDS, violence against women, health care professionals, eating disorders, birth control & sex education, exercise and abortion. Students also presented their papers to the class at the end of the semester in conjunction with the HIP project presentations.

Health Literature

This non-graded assignment asked students to visit a library or bookstore and peruse the shelves for women’s health books published in the lay press. They were asked to review tables of contents and come to class prepared to present one particular book they found of interest. The purpose of this assignment was to encourage students to search for information about women’s health and to have them realize just how much information is available in print. Another key point of this assignment was to underscore how many people are unaware of the wealth of information available. In fact, many people rely solely on physicians and other health care providers for information. Sites on the World Wide Web (WWW) were also discussed during this class. Some examples of web sites are listed in Table II. Again, the point was made about the accessibility to this information. Only if people are aware of the information and are able to access it will they benefit from it.

RESOURCES

The textbook used for the course was Kobinsky, M. Timyan, and J. Gay (eds.) *The Health of Women: A Global Perspective*, Westview Press, Inc., Boulder, CO (1993). The textbook offered general readings appropriate at the undergraduate level. These general readings were supplemented with current readings from scientific journals. The balance between the specificity offered through the scientific papers and the lay approach of the textbook was complementary. Several videocassette presentations of women’s health topics aired on PBS in the Fall of 1994 were also used. For example, presentations included “Getting ready for menopause: A guide for the 40-something woman,” “A Woman’s Heart,” and “Inside Hunger,” which discussed eating disorders. Appendix A lists the articles included as reading for each of the topic areas.

COURSE OUTCOMES

Through the evaluation of the course, students expressed positive opinions and offered suggestions for improvement. Overall, they enjoyed sharing their own experiences, which personalized the class. They felt they could benefit from additional time devoted to discussion. Comments indicated that students felt that they benefited from the various lecturers and were impressed by the wide range of experts available on their campus. They felt, however, that more leadership in the discussions would be helpful and that because there were so many lecturers the class was a bit disjointed. Most students said they would have preferred a term paper to the exams and greatly enjoyed the HIP project.

Student’s performance was quite good, with most receiving A’s. They were very polite and attentive to the guest lecturers and involved in the discussions. Their questions of the guest experts and of each other were insightful and intelligent. They rated the most effective learning experiences as the HIP project and the interaction between the students who shared their own expertise from life. The response from students who had little interest in women’s health issues at the beginning of the class was the most dramatic. Comments from them indicated that the course “enlightened” them about the importance of awareness of gender issues and the wealth of health information available to them. They were excited to share what they had learned with their mothers, grandmothers, other relatives and friends.

Since this course was initiated, it has been offered a second time coordinated by a medical sociology graduate student, with continued lecturers from faculty in the Health Sciences Center and Arts and Sciences. For two years, a national women’s health conference has been convened on campus with leaders from the WHI and NIH. In the spring of 1997, the Gender and Health course was offered as a graduate seminar with required participation in the national conference. The texts used included: (i) Villarosa, L. (ed.) *Body and Soul: The Black Woman’s Guide to Physical Health and Emotional Well Being*, Harper Collins: New York (1994); and (ii) The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective’s *The New Our Bodies, Ourselves*, Simon and Schuster, New York NY (1992).

CONCLUSIONS

There is a need to train health care professionals, including pharmacists, with an appreciation of and sensitivity to gender issues. The course described exposes students to topics that will help them develop this sensitivity and covers a broad range of topics in women’s health. Students learned about the many facets of women’s health, how women’s health care needs differ from men’s, and began to understand the significance of the Women’s Health Initiative. Such a course would enable pharmacy students to achieve a solid foundation in women’s health and prepare them to better address the needs of their female patients. Finally, as a course open to the entire campus, diverse student enrollment would promote the sharing of different points of view which is consistent with the multidisciplinary approach to teaching. Both health care professional students and Arts and Sciences students could gain much from such a course and would bring with their educational backgrounds which would enrich the experience for all those involved.

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References


(3) Rosser, S.V., “Gender bias in clinical research: the difference it

APPENDIX. COURSE TOPICS AND SUPPLEMENTAL READINGS

Epidemiology, Access to Care (Insurance)

Social Support

Poverty and other Enabling Issues

Nutrition

Global and Cultural issues

Gender and Psychotropic Drug Use

Caregiving

Violence Against Women

Gender and Communication

Obesity and Body Image

Heart Disease

Aging: Menopause, Osteoporosis, Hormone Replacement Therapy

Cancer

HIV/AIDS
Conti, L., Lieb, S., Spradling T. and Witte, J.J., “AIDS Epidemic Among Florida Women,” Journal of the Florida Medi-

**Women as Health Care Professionals**


