Men’s Health As A Public Health Issue

Simply put, there is a silent crisis in America, a crisis of epic proportions: On average, American men live shorter and less-healthy lives than American women.

"Males have a 2.4-fold higher mortality due to accidents and violence," writes Dr. David Gremillion, a member of MHN’s Board of Directors and an Assistant Professor at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine. "Men lead in each of the top 10 causes of death in America, and their life span is 5.7 years shorter than their female counterparts, with an overall age-adjusted mortality 1.6 times greater than that of females. This applies across the diagnostic spectrum, including heart disease, cancer, and chronic liver disease1."

A recent Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study of ambulatory care by women illustrates just how wide the health care gulf between the two sexes is. Among other things, the study found that2:

- Excluding pregnancy-related office visits, women make twice as many preventative care visits as men.
- Overall, women ages 15-44 are 56% more likely than men in the same age group to visit the doctor for any reason. Among people 65 years of age and over, the rate of visits was fairly similar.
- Regardless of race, the overall rate of ambulatory care use among women with non pregnancy-related diagnoses was 33 percent higher than for men.

The study’s authors offered several possible explanations for this disparity: Women’s self-reported health is worse than men’s, on average, which may either reflect more illness or differences in the way health is viewed or discussed by women. Women generally are responsible for their family’s health and so may think about health care needs more than men. They also tend to use medical care for screening and health education more often than men.

Men’s devotion to the workplace is also partly to blame. Various studies have shown that men are less likely than women to take time off from work for health related issues. Men’s reluctance to make timely health care visits, however, is not only a function of work and time, but also of the way our culture socializes boys from earliest age: "big boys don’t cry." That attitude extends to the workplace where men feel compelled to ignore their own physical (and mental) health needs and put in a "full 40 hours" ... or more ... knowing in their hearts that if they take time off for anything less than a true health emergency, they will lose status in the workplace, and, in the case of hourly workers, most probably their job.

“The huge disparity between men and women results partly from a lack of awareness, poor health education, and a paucity of male-specific health programs,” explains Dr. Gremillion. "The costs, including the cost of caring for dependents left behind, is enormous.”

What can be done to counter this pattern? In a recent article written for The News and Observer,” Dr. Gremillion offers some advice3:

“Research has shown that women strongly affect the health decisions within families, and this includes emphasis on the health of their spouses and the younger males who are forming attitudes about healthy lifestyles. Women, spouses and others with a male in their life can help them understand the importance of healthy lifestyles and health-seeking behavior. By expressing concern, women give men “permission” to be momentarily weak and honestly express their vulnerabilities and feel more comfortable in the health care setting.”

This, coupled with a proactive workplace health program, can go a long way toward encouraging healthy behaviors among men and reducing the health disparity between men and women.

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1 Physician’s Weekly, September 3, 2001
2 Utilization of Ambulatory Medical Care by Women: United States, 1997-98, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Center for Health Statistics Vital and Health Statistics, Series 13, # 149 : July 2001 : pages 12 & 15
3 Men’s health needs a heartfelt change, June 17, 2001, The News and Observer, Raleigh, NC