

The future of men and their health

Are men in danger of extinction?

It may seem incredible now, but up to just 25 years ago there was very limited research specifically targeted at women's health. The world seemed to assume that, except for issues related to reproduction, women's health problems, needs, and solutions were essentially the same as men's.¹ As a result of vigorous lobbying by women from all over the world, research on women's health needs mushroomed in less than three decades. Major studies are now generating increasing evidence on important differences between men and women, from the cellular to the societal level.²

Almost by default, the strong emphasis on women's issues (which we applaud and support) has revealed areas of men's health that require just as much attention. Perhaps one of the most puzzling is the difference in life expectancy between men and women. Despite having had most of the social determinants of health in their favour, men have higher mortality rates for all 15 leading causes of death³ and a life expectancy about seven years shorter than women's.⁴ Men's reluctance to embrace preventive strategies has also contributed to the spread of AIDS, particularly in Africa,⁵ and to an alarming rise in infections among young men, including other sexually transmitted diseases.⁶ Furthermore, there is a sustained increase in psychosocial disorders in men, including alcohol and substance abuse, mid-life crisis, depression, and domestic violence.⁷ Men's increasing aggression and autoaggression remain an unsolved health and societal problem. As you read this, over 30 wars and conflicts rage around the world, mostly created, maintained, and aggravated by men.

Can something be done to improve men's life expectancy? Are there effective and morally acceptable strategies to modify men's negative behaviour towards themselves and others? We hope that these questions and the need to answer them trigger a strong movement in support of more focused and stronger research on men's health.

Although there is still a long way to go in most societies around the world, it is clear that women can perform (and on most occasions outperform) pretty much all the tasks traditionally reserved for men. In most of the developed world women are starting to outnumber men in medical schools and making rapid gains in terms of equality in compensation and opportunities in the workforce. Will we see the gap in life expectancy between men and women widen as the gaps in social determinants of health become narrower? The answer is probably yes, unless women

continue to adopt the same negative behaviours that characterise men today.

With the advent of sperm banks, in vitro fertilisation, sex sorting techniques, sperm independent fertilisation of eggs with somatic cells, human cloning, and same sex marriages, it is also reasonable to wonder about the future role of men in society. In a recent article a female Canadian journalist posed the question: "Are men the new women?" This question was motivated by the proliferation of magazines and television shows aimed at men with contents and formats that mirror what has been typically regarded as "women's stuff."⁸ What will be the implications of the redefinition of men's roles within the family, work, and society on their health? Will men be needed at all?

Are men and society prepared for the population explosion led by the Baby Boomers and by their "global ageing"? What will be the consequences of rapid fertility declines in the "post-Boomer" phase? Does hormone replacement therapy have a role in men? The *Men's Health Report of Vienna 1999* and the World Health Organization report, *Men, Aging and Health*, published in 2000, provide a good starting point to look at the priorities and specific strategies that will be required to improve and maintain ageing men's health in a rapidly changing world.^{9 10} There is an urgent need to advertise and promote men's health in a positive way. In addition, gender specific training of primary care workers must be supported.

We see this theme issue of the *BMJ* as a great opportunity to invite the international community to reflect about men's health and the opportunities it creates for transdisciplinary activities. These span from basic research on sex and gender differences to new strategies of public health and health promotion, targeting men of all ages, with special emphasis on life course, high risk periods, environmental factors, and risk factor epidemiology. We have selected articles that focus on clinical and population health issues related to men's health.

But this is not all: this issue coincides with the first World Congress on Men's Health in Vienna (www.wcmh2001.com), which will host the celebration of Men's World Day on 3 November 2001 (www.mensworldday.com) as well as the launch of the International Society for Men's Health and the European Men's Health Forum. We hope that these initiatives will act as strong platforms to support strategic and innovative research on men's health and the generation of strong commitment for collaborative work by

researchers interested in men's and women's health, and the role of gender in society.

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The international men's health movement

Has grown to the stage that it can start to influence international bodies

Men's health is emerging as an important issue in an increasing number of countries around the world, notably the United Kingdom, Austria, Switzerland, Australia, and the United States. There is also increasing interest in working with men on sexual and reproductive health issues in parts of Central and South America, Africa, and Asia. However, progress towards international contact and collaboration between men's health advocates with an interest that extends beyond traditional clinical concerns such as erectile dysfunction or prostate cancer has so far been extremely slow.

In many ways this is not surprising. The idea that men have specific health needs, experiences, and concerns related to their gender as well as their biological sex is relatively new—certainly much newer than the concept of “women's health.”¹ The psychosocial aspects of male health are still not accepted, or even understood, by many health practitioners and policy-makers. Moreover, even in those countries where greater attention has been paid to men's health issues, initiatives have generally remained small scale. The focus of men's health advocates has, understandably, so far been intranational rather than international.

But there are now signs that men's health work has reached a sufficient level of maturity in enough countries to create a new interest in developing international links. The most important event in this process, the First World Congress on Men's Health, takes place in Vienna this month. This aims to increase awareness of men's health among the medical community, to facilitate networking, and to address current men's health issues (including erectile dysfunction, depression, and cardiovascular disease). The International Society for Men's Health will be established at the world congress, an organisation that is expected to have an advocacy as well as a networking role. The European Men's Health Initiative will also be launched at the Congress. This seeks to encourage the development of men's health policy and practice at a Europe wide level as well as within individual countries. The first step will be the establishment of a European Men's Health Forum.

International research and debate will be further encouraged by the publication from this month of the US based *International Journal of Men's Health*.

At a time when men's health work is relatively new and underresourced in every country, it might seem premature for its advocates to devote effort and resources to establishing international networks. Arguably this will be at the expense of developing practical local projects that could begin to make a difference to male morbidity and mortality.

The potential advantages of international collaboration are almost certainly greater than the risks, however. One major benefit will be that the proponents of men's health, particularly in those countries where the arguments for improving men's health are not yet accepted, will gain encouragement from work going on elsewhere. International collaboration will also create important new opportunities for sharing information and examples of good practice.

There is now an increasing body of men's health work for health professionals to refer to. In England and Wales, for example, the Men's Health Forum has helped develop policies to tackle the growing problem of young men and suicide.² The forum was also instrumental in establishing the All Party Parliamentary Group on Men's Health in March 2001. The city of Vienna has published a report on men's health,³ introduced a cardiovascular disease prevention programme targeting men and women in different ways, and organised two men's health days in 2000 and 2001. The Swiss Foundation for Health Promotion is supporting a wide ranging men's health initiative which aims to facilitate the work of professionals and fund pilot projects (www.radix.ch/d/html/maennergesundheit.html).

In the United States Congress established an annual national men's health week in 1994 (the week ending on Fathers' Day in June). This provides an opportunity for hospitals, clinics, military bases, churches, and voluntary organisations to hold local men's health education events (www.menshealthweek.org). Earlier this year a bill was introduced in Congress