
Increased mortality in women doctors

SIR—In your Dec 10 editorial you claim that “Women doctors die on average 10 years earlier than their male counterparts, the opposite of what happens in the general population. One factor here is the suicide rate among female physicians, which is significantly higher than among male doctors”. The sole reference in support of this remarkable claim is principally an empirical study of perceived stressors in Swiss nurses.¹ However, Heim’s discussion¹ contains the claim that “a number of investigations tell a provocatively sad story: women in medicine only reach an average age 10 years lower than that of their male colleagues” with a single study cited in support of the claim of a decreased life-span. That report² is a study of the reported age at death in the obituaries of German doctors in *Die Berliner Ärztekammer* and the *Hessischen Ärzteblatt* during 1964–76: the male doctors had died at the average ages of 65·9 and 67·1 years, respectively, compared with average ages at death of women doctors of 61·5 and 58·9 years (a mean difference of 6·3 years). Although these data almost certainly indicate that the women doctors who died were younger than the male doctors who died, they do not, of course, mean that women doctors live less long than men.

This error is a well-known one in epidemiology, and has previously been invoked in discounting the probably erroneous claim that left-handers have a lesser life-span than right-handers,³ in which it results from handedness being confounded with birth cohort, so that on average self-

professed left-handers are more common in later cohorts than earlier.¹ Like left-handedness, being a female doctor is a cultural phenomenon which is more common in later 20th century cohorts than earlier. It is therefore not only true that dead women doctors are of a lesser age than dead men doctors, but also that living female doctors are of a lesser age than living male doctors. Simple comparison of age at death is therefore not appropriate since the denominators for calculating the death rates of men and women are not the same. Appropriately age-corrected mortality rates are needed, and they would probably not show that women doctors live a substantially shorter time than men.

The claim for an increased suicide rate amongst women doctors is likewise dubious, since the only cited study⁵ of the suicide rate of female physicians also suffers from the same fallacy. A greater proportion of female physicians than male physicians were reported in the obituary records of the American Medical Association of 1967-72 as having committed suicide. However, since suicide is more common in younger than in older persons, a crude, non-age-corrected rate is probably deceptive in comparisons of male and female doctors. Taken together these studies do not seem to provide compelling evidence for the claim that female doctors have a higher mortality than male doctors. Instead it seems more probable that, like women in general in western societies, they live longer than men.

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- 1 Heim E. Job stressors and coping in health professions. *Psychother Psychosom* 1991; 55: 90-99.
- 2 Falck J, Thiels C. Das Sterbealter der Ärzte in Berlin-West und Hessen von 1964 bis 1976. *Med Klin* 1979; 74: 1140-43.
- 3 Halpern DF, Coren S. Handedness and life span. *N Engl J Med* 1991; 324: 998.
- 4 Rothman KJ. Left-handedness and life expectancy. *N Engl J Med* 1991; 325: 1041.
- 5 Pitts FN Jr, Schuller AB, Rich CL, Pitts AF. Suicide among US women physicians, 1967-1972. *Am J Psychiatry* 1979; 136: 694-96.