



Are male patients comfortable with women doctors?

By E.M. Gardner | August 25, 2017

Are men less enthusiastic than women about seeing physicians of the opposite gender? Maybe, according to an analysis of more than 2 million primary care visits.

The study, which tracked patient visits on the athenahealth network between January and June 2014, looked at how many patients during that time frame returned to a new practice within 18 months of their first visits.

Roughly half of the patients returned within that time if they shared their physicians' gender. Women returned to male doctors at nearly the same rate. But only 40 percent of male patients returned to their female doctors.

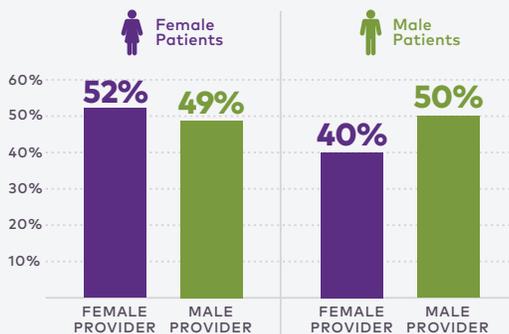
The pattern was particularly true for patients with commercial insurance. While 52 percent of commercially insured male patients returned to their male physicians, only 40 percent returned to female physicians. For commercially insured women, return rates were 51 percent for female physicians and 48 percent for male physicians.

Medicaid was the only insurance type that showed no difference in return rates for men based on the gender of the physician.

The problem doesn't appear to be related to the quality of care that male patients are receiving: A 2017 MedStatix/athenaHealth survey of 40,000 patients showed that men who saw female physicians gave those providers slightly *higher* ratings than those who saw male physicians.

So, what is the problem? Women have long been accustomed to male doctors – even now, only about a third of practicing physicians are female. Male

New patients who return to the same primary care provider within 18 months of a first visit



*New patient defined as someone who has not visited the practice in at least two years, or ever.

Sample: 2M+ visits January - June 2014 at practices on athenaNet
Source: athenaResearch

patients, meanwhile, have expressed reservations about visiting women doctors for some time.

In particular, male patients seem uncomfortable with female physicians' use of chaperones during office visits. Long a common practice when female patients see male physicians, chaperons are meant to make patients feel more at ease during intimate examinations and prevent inappropriate behavior (and false charges of inappropriate behavior) from either party.

However, chaperons can make patients more uncomfortable – male patients in particular are overwhelmingly opposed to any third party in the room, particularly a female chaperon – and most chaperones are female.

This issue isn't likely to resolve itself soon. Almost half of new medical school graduates are women, and they will represent a growing proportion of the cohort of physicians who are accepting new patients.

One glimmer of optimism: In a recent exchange on quora.com, male patients expressed their preference for female physicians on a number of bases, including superior listening skills and – for certain sensitive procedures – a lighter physical touch.

E.M. Gardner is a writer based in Chicago. Additional reporting by Lia Novotny.



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