

PPFA Seminar 2019 – A review

As a medical student attendee at the recent 2019 PPFA Health Practitioners Seminar, I was genuinely inspired by the community that I encountered. Being a student, I have only had a limited window of experience into the complex world of gynaecology. I came along to the seminar to broaden my exposure to this specialty in a real-life clinical context, and to deepen my understanding of how gynaecologists work alongside other faculties to further improve women's health. Women's health is like a complex puzzle, with some missing pieces and ever-changing solutions. Encompassing sexuality, identity, body image, power, femininity, motherhood and an infinite spectrum of personal lived experiences, it can never be holistically understood by one single profession alone. As this year's seminar highlighted, women's health demands a rigorous approach by a multi-disciplinary team of well-trained, empathic and open-minded individuals.

Many faculties, including science, medicine and art, have failed to explore, understand and celebrate the complexity of womanhood. Women's autonomy, independence and basic human rights have been failed time and time again by misogynistic societal structures. Our bodies have been viewed as taboo and objectified as primarily sexual. Even at a most basic biological level, we have been misunderstood. As a tragic example of this, I note that the first anatomically correct illustration of a clitoris was only published in 1998, by Australia's first female urologist, Helen O'Connell¹. Nestled somewhere deep in this supposed mystery of women's health lies the enigma of pelvic pain. An unrecognized piece of an underappreciated puzzle. The ignorance surrounding pelvic pain has caused countless women physical and emotional suffering, infertility, shame and an unfair sense of failure. Failure to be sexual, to bear children, and to understand and celebrate the full glory of their bodies.

As a consumer of the pelvic pain services available to Australian women, it took me years to build the self-confidence required to explain my symptoms to a GP. After several attempts with various doctors, I was at last embraced by professionals who had upskilled themselves in the presentations and causes of pelvic pain. I am endlessly grateful for their understanding. But I am also deeply sad for the women who have not had such a positive experience in seeking to demystify their pain.

At this year's seminar, we learnt about the multiple organ systems that are involved in both the causes and effects of pelvic pain; reproductive, gastrointestinal, musculoskeletal and nervous system organs all delicately interacting and influencing one another. We heard about the multiple manifestations of pain; how it can run so deeply and cause such distress as to completely unhinge a woman from her daily life. We were challenged to contemplate the expression of pain; both subjectively through language choices, and objectively through scientific interpretation of pain intensity using the colour spectrum. And we learnt how to utilise the skills sets of multiple professions, in offering women the most effective approach to managing their pelvic pain. By combining educators, primary care physicians, medical sub-specialists, physiotherapists, psychologists and neuroscientists, we saw how our most

promising solutions are those which fully acknowledge the complexity of each woman's pain.

As a medical student and a young adult, I found the PPEP Talk School's Program an exciting initiative to learn more about. Seeing how this inspiring team are working together to empower the next generation of young women, and their male counterparts, is a perfect example of how we can start changing the culture of pelvic pain. In beginning to reverse the damage done by centuries of ignorance, cultural taboo and anatomical misinformation, this program offers a societal-wide strategy to start responding to the problem. Pelvic pain is so much more than a medical condition. In educating young women to understand, respect and trust their body's inner-workings, we are teaching them to protect their futures. If a young woman can trust her intuition, become her own advocate and take steps to address her pelvic pain, we may have enabled her to work towards freedom from pain, before it becomes an unwelcome part of her identity.

The PPFA Health Practitioners Seminar gave me hope for the future of pelvic pain. Change is already certainly in motion; from educating teenagers about their rights to access healthcare, to empowering women of all ages to seek early diagnosis and management. If we can continue to scaffold a holistic support network for women, while encouraging a deeper understanding from society at large, then we can truly demystify a condition that affects up to 25% of women². We can alleviate some of their burden by acknowledging their pain, ensuring they are well informed, and supporting them as they redefine and ultimately manage their pain. We can help them take back control of their lives.

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¹ Fyfe, M 2018, *Get cliterate: how a Melbourne doctor is redefining female sexuality*, Sydney Morning Herald, accessed 1st June 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/health-and-wellness/get-cliterate-how-a-melbourne-doctor-is-redefining-female-sexuality-20181203-p50jvv.html>

² Pelvic Pain Foundation of Australia 2019, *Pelvic Pain in Women*, accessed 1st June 2019, <https://www.pelvicpain.org.au/pelvic-pain-in-women/>