

## Gender Issues and Discrimination - Overview



In U.S. society, men and women are considered equals. Women are entitled to and expect to be granted the same consideration and respect as men. Furthermore, women are guaranteed equal protections under the law. Although there is still progress to be made in terms of gender equality in the workplace, women have access to every occupation and career path, including all fields of medicine. Most nurses in the United States are female, and approximately half of all medical students in the United States are women. When interacting with patients and colleagues, the physician must always be respectful and treat both men and women equally. The U.S. workplace is intolerant of any form of gender discrimination, and there is no place for these behaviors in the medical workplace or in the doctor-patient relationship.

## Gender Issues and Discrimination - Scenario Script

*Two male doctors are at a table in a break room drinking coffee and looking through a patient chart. A female doctor enters and pours herself some coffee.*

Doctor 1: The echo and CT didn't show anything.

Doctor 2: What about the blood work?

Doctor 1: It's all pretty nonspecific.

Doctor 2: This is a tough one. Maybe you should get Cardiology to see him.

[The female doctor turns and addresses the other two doctors.]

Doctor 3: Are you guys discussing Mr. Kramer?

Doctor 1: Yeah

Doctor 3: I was thinking, how about a MUGA scan?

Doctor 2: What? [very dismissive]

Doctor 3: A MUGA scan.

Doctor 2: No, that's not gonna help...[to Doctor 1] Tony, did you review all his 12 leads?

Doctor 1: Yeah, I had Harry take a look over it, and he didn't see anything.

Doctor 3: I'm pretty good with reading EKGs. May I have a look? [looking over their shoulders at the chart]

Doctor 2: Sweetheart, I don't think you're going to pick up anything that Harry missed. Don't you have some orders to write or something?

[Doctor 3 shakes her head and walks away; she turns to see them laughing at her]

Doctor 2: [shaking his head] Go figure!

### Gender Issues and Discrimination - Discussion Questions

1. Although the two male doctors in this video clearly state that they do not believe that the female doctor would be able to contribute to the analysis of the cardiograms, their overall behavior says a great deal more. What are the unspoken messages that are being conveyed?
2. What message does the use of the term "Sweetheart" convey? Are there ever situations where terms like this may be appropriately used?
3. How might the female doctor have responded to being addressed as "Sweetheart?"
4. What options does this female doctor have with respect to confronting the male doctors about their behaviors and attitudes? What factors may influence her choice of how to proceed?
5. What resources might be available to her in dealing with issues of gender discrimination?
6. How do you think these male physicians likely behave when interacting with female nursing staff and female patients?
7. How might a male or female IMG physician coming from a culture in which women do not hold such positions deal with being supervised by female residents or attendings?

## Gender Issues and Discrimination - Scenario Analysis

This scenario demonstrates behavior on the part of male physicians toward their female colleague that would be unacceptable in the U.S. workplace. The two male doctors are struggling over a very difficult case. Though they have already sought consultation from an expert colleague, they seem unable to sort out what is going on with the patient. A female doctor overhears them and asks to have a look at the patient's cardiograms, indicating that she believes she may be able to offer some help.

In the United States, the reaction of the male physicians would be interpreted as dismissive and patronizing, and they even address the female physician using a demeaning term, "Sweetheart." They suggest that she should go and tend to her more mundane duties since, in their opinion, she would not be likely to contribute anything of value to their review of the case, and she is visibly offended. As she abruptly leaves the room, the two male doctors display a mixture of confusion and amusement over her reaction.

Approximately half of all U.S. doctors are women, and women have distinguished themselves in all areas of medical education and practice. They serve as deans of medical schools, chairs of departments, and as outstanding attending physicians and practitioners. They have earned and deserve the respect of their male colleagues and the entire health care community. Although historically female physicians more commonly pursued careers in pediatrics and other primary care specialties, they are now well represented in all specialties including the most physically challenging surgical specialties.

Any behavior that conveys a lack of professional respect or includes demeaning references toward female physicians is unacceptable in the U.S. medical workplace, and will need to be addressed. The U.S. medical system is a team environment in which all members should be treated with respect. IMGs will often be supervised by female residents or attendings and should respect their authority, even if they come from a culture in which women do not typically hold such positions. Similarly, during their GME training, both male and female IMGs may be called upon to take leadership positions and must be prepared to accept that role. Again, the team dynamic of the U.S. medical system requires that all team members be treated with respect and equality.

The male residents in this scenario need to be confronted about their inappropriate behavior and attitudes. In this situation, the female resident had a number of options. She could confront them directly at the time that they made the inappropriate comments. She might have responded that her name is not "Sweetheart," but "Doctor Cruz" or "Maria." She also could discuss their behavior with the program director or her attending. Whether by direct confrontation or discussion with an authority, such behavior should not go unchallenged.



**Gender Issues and Discrimination - Scenario Analysis** (continued)

This scenario deals only with the issue of gender discrimination among medical colleagues, but the issue also has important implications with respect to patient care. Both male and female patients are entitled to be given meaningful information about their care, to question or challenge their physicians, and to participate actively in the decision-making process with regard to their medical care. Issues regarding women who choose to defer decision making to their husbands or other male family members are discussed in the module titled, "The Role of the Patient's Family."