

Women's Health: Issues in Mental Health, Alcoholism, and Substance Abuse

Introductory Remarks

MARY JANE ENGLAND, MD

Dr. England is the President-Elect of the American Medical Women's Association and Associate Dean and Director of the Lucius N. Littauer Master in Public Administration Program, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. The introduction is based on her presentation at the National Conference on Women's Health, held in Bethesda, MD, June 17-18, 1986. Dr. England served as the Moderator of the plenary panel session on "Women's Health: Issues in Mental Health, Alcoholism, and Substance Abuse."

Synopsis

The American Medical Women's Association has chosen as one of its strategic goals for the next year,

and probably for a lot longer, preventing young women from smoking. Smoking is of great concern to all as the death rate from lung cancer among women sky-rockets to bypass even breast cancer.

In alcohol and drug abuse, women who abuse alcohol and other drugs face a greater social stigma than the male abuser of these substances. The higher incidence of depression among women adds to the likelihood of self-medication with alcohol and other drugs.

Reproductive and sexual dysfunctions are frequent in women who have alcohol, drug abuse, and mental health problems, and they are more vulnerable to rape and other forms of sexual exploitation. Sexual abuse and assault may also have played an integral part in their problems.

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Mental Health and Older Women

BENJAMIN LIPTZIN, MD

Dr. Liptzin is the Director of Geriatric Psychiatry at McLean Hospital, Belmont, MA. The paper is based on his presentation at the National Conference on Women's Health, held in Bethesda, MD, June 17-18, 1986.

Synopsis

The number of elderly women is growing in absolute numbers and in proportion to the U. S. population. Current epidemiologic research indicates that the most frequent psychiatric disorders among older women are phobias, severe cognitive impairment, dysthymia, and major depressive episode without grief. The rates of all of these disorders, except for cognitive impairment,

are lower for older than for younger women. The rates of psychiatric disorders in older women are higher than in older men, except for alcohol abuse-dependence, which is higher in men.

Depression is a common psychiatric problem in older women. The differential diagnosis includes other medical disorders, drug effects, normal grief, and early dementia. Older depressed women may present with physical complaints rather than complaints of depression, and thus be misdiagnosed. Treatment consists of psychotherapy, antidepressant medication, and activities to improve self-esteem.

Dementia affects 4 percent of elderly women over age 65, and 20 percent of those over age 85. The most common cause is Alzheimer's disease. Current research is focusing on abnormalities in the cholinergic system in the brain. A careful psychiatric evaluation may identify medical conditions, including depression, which can be treated and can lead to improvements in the patient's functioning.