

“I Want to Talk about Birth Control”: Patient Elaboration on Women’s Health Topics among African Americans

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Background. Women’s health can be a sensitive topic for female patients to discuss with physicians during medical interactions. Intuitively, female patients should feel more comfortable discussing such topics with female physicians than with male physicians. However, empirical findings are somewhat mixed. Some studies have shown that female patients are indeed more open with female physicians about women’s health topics, whereas other studies have shown no such significant gender preference by female patients.

Objectives. The goal of the study was two-fold: (1) to examine whether physician gender is associated with female patients’ likelihood of elaboration on women’s health topics; and (2) to explore another potential factor that may encourage female patients to elaborate on such topics.

Methods. The study was a secondary data analysis of a longitudinal study of 156 low-income, Black patients’ health. In the parent study, medical interactions between patients and physicians were video-recorded and transcribed. In the present secondary analysis, we used transcripts of 101 female patients and coded (1) whether female patients and their physicians discussed women’s health during the interactions, (2) if they discussed women’s health, whether or not female patients elaborated on such topics, and (3) the degree to which physicians engaged in supportive talk.

Results. Of 101 female patients, 55.4 % ($n = 56$) had women’s health discussions with their physicians. Furthermore, of those 56 patients who discussed women’s health, 67.9% ($n = 38$) elaborated on such topics. Neither whether patients discussed women’s health nor whether they elaborated on such topics was associated with physician gender. However, our preliminary result indicated that there was a trend, such that the degree of physicians’ engagement in supportive talk was associated with patients’ elaboration on women’s health.

Conclusion. Physician gender tends to receive more attention than other factors when researchers investigate what influences female patients’ willingness to discuss women’s health

topics. However, our findings suggest that other factors may play an important role to encourage female patients to discuss and elaborate on their women's health during the medical interactions. The present study was conducted using an underserved sample—African Americans—who often face not only gender-discordance but also racial-discordance when they interact with physicians. This study adds to the literature of patient-physician communication in women's health by exploring factors that may encourage discussion between African Americans and racially-discordant physicians. Implications for future studies will be discussed.