



NEWS RELEASE

February 1, 2023

Report reveals the impact of health taboos on Alberta women

Taboos perpetuate discrimination and negative stereotypes, isolate women, and contribute to inequities in healthcare

A new report authored by the [Alberta Women's Health Foundation](#) (AWHF) reveals the toll taboos in women's health have on Alberta women. *Surveying the Silence: Exploring the impact of taboos in women's health* shows the issues that have created a culture of silence that limit access to knowledge and care, leading to detriments in overall mental health and well-being.

"Surveying the Silence reveals the inconsistent, conflicting, and even disparaging responses many women in Alberta experience when seeking medical diagnosis and treatment for their gynecological health issues. Survey respondents have shared how these disappointing outcomes are not random but instead common as misinformation, misdiagnosis, and even dismissive responses are experienced in clinics across the province," says Sharlene Rutherford, CEO of the AWHF. "It goes without saying that these historic gaps in knowledge and understanding need to be evaluated, discussed, and tackled by leaders in health policy and planning and by academic institutions. For the AWHF, our mission is to increase support for research in women's health issues, another critical component that has been in deficit."

The AWHF report includes the results of a survey of more than 2,200 Albertans, the vast majority of whom identify as women. The report, the second of its kind released by the AWHF, is supported by partner Organon. The report focuses on the quiet places, the topics our culture leads many of us to avoid, or the questions we do not know to ask. The conditions about which little is known and, according to respondents, less is done, such as menopause, endometriosis, painful periods and premenstrual dysphoric disorder (PMDD), polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), pelvic floor issues, and more. The pain and discomfort associated with these conditions often hangs in the air unmentioned—or when voiced, can result in tension, confusion, or dismissal.

Patient advocate Kristina Jarvis shares many of the same sentiments of those surveyed for the report. "The reality is, PCOS affects so much more than a woman's ability to have children," says Jarvis. "It affects our hearts, our body weight, and our chances of developing cancer. It affects how you see yourself entirely. Women's health deserves as much attention as that which is placed on the children we can or cannot bear."

"As a leader in women's health and advocate for gender equity, Organon is acutely aware of the compounding and complex barriers women face in accessing healthcare," says Michael Casia,

President and Managing Director, Organon Canada. “We are proud to partner with Alberta Women’s Health Foundation to help unearth these inequities, bringing stories to light to better understand how we can play a role to help move the needle toward equity.”

Dr. Jane Schulz, Chair at the University of Alberta Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, and Alberta Women's Health Foundation Research Chair, has seen first-hand how embarrassment and/or misinformation can delay or cause women to avoid obstetrics and gynecology appointments that can lead to complications that turn a minor issue into a major health problem.

“Women regularly visit gynecology clinics with advanced stages of prolapse, endometriosis, after prolonged suffering with abnormal vaginal bleeding, and sometimes with advanced gynecologic cancers because instead of addressing their gynecological health symptoms they simply regard them ‘normal pain or discomfort they should just deal with’. As a result, their conditions are harder to treat, and the chance of a cure or positive outcome might be less,” says Schulz.

Support from Albertans needed more than ever

The AWHF is advocating for the government and businesses to invest in women's health research with a goal of dispelling the silence that is plaguing women’s health, opening the door for more productive conversations and making change possible. The foundation is also calling on Albertans to step up as champions for women's health by talking about it, and pushing for more flexibility in the workplace and greater support at home for working mothers.

"Even when women seek help, evidence shows many concerns are overlooked and dismissed, and they are more likely to be stereotyped as exaggerating or being over-emotional in healthcare settings. Evidence shows that women are less likely to receive aggressive treatment when diagnosed and are more likely to have their pain characterized as ‘emotional,’ ‘psychogenic,’ and therefore ‘not real’," says Rutherford. " This concept has been termed the ‘Gender Pain Gap’ and is worse for Black women, Indigenous women and women of colour. The time for change is now."

The survey – focused on the impact of taboos in women’s health in Alberta - was conducted July 11 - August 2, 2022, by Y station. A total of 2,229 respondents completed an online survey, with 91% of survey respondents identifying as female.

For more information:

Lindsay Robertson

Vice President, Communications, Marketing and Brand

Royal Alexandra Hospital Foundation

780-217-2613

LRobertson@royalalex.org

BACKGROUNDER

Women's Health by the Numbers

- **Almost two-thirds of women surveyed** found it difficult to talk to primary healthcare providers about their concerns.
- **Only 24% of women feel their physician is very knowledgeable** about gynecological and reproductive health. Delays in treatment were commonly reported, and where a diagnosis is more complicated or specialized, such as endometriosis, a **delay was reported by as many as 85% of sufferers**.
- **One in five** respondents feels that their gender is a barrier to receiving care.
- Treatment effectiveness is another area of concern; more women report **treatment for perimenopause is ineffective (39%)** than highly effective (35%).
- The **highest satisfaction** in treatment for a diagnosed condition was for endometriosis, at **just 44%**, once a diagnosis was achieved.

The Alberta Women's Health Foundation

The Alberta Women's Health Foundation (AWHF) aims to foster equity in women's health, close gaps that exist in research today, and connect pathways from lab to life all of which advance clinical care at the Lois Hole Hospital for Women and other women's health centres across Alberta and beyond. An initiative of the Royal Alexandra Hospital Foundation, the AWHF supports over 160 researchers at the Women and Children's Health Research Institute (WCHRI), whose research projects focus specifically on women's health.

Eliminating barriers to improving women's health

In conversation:

- By normalizing discussions around women's health challenges and not accepting pain as normal or expecting women to just deal with the pain without treatment
- By becoming comfortable talking about women-specific health issues with physicians, employers and personal networks.
- By asking questions and talking about women's health experiences.

At home:

- By acknowledging women who are struggling with undiagnosed pain and encouraging them to seek treatment.

At work:

- By implementing and promoting flexible work policies that accommodate time off for women to address health concerns.
- By encouraging women to address undiagnosed pain without fear of job loss or reduction of compensation or hours.
- By bolstering mental health resources and supports for all.
- By not judging those with employment gaps or entering new careers.

In the exam room:

- By asking the right questions, listening, and not dismissing.
- By promoting improved screening techniques for gender-based trends and concerns.

In policy:

- By investing in women's health research.
- By mandating the inclusion and analysis of sex and gender in health research.