

Decision Processes Colloquia

Monday, November 18, 2024

Where: JMHH F 55

When: 12:00 – 1:20 pm

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Pain and prejudice: Sex bias in pain management decisions

ABSTRACT:

Adequate pain treatment is critical for patients' physical and mental health. It is therefore essential that healthcare providers extend the appropriate treatment to each and every patient in pain. Here we build on findings showing that due to psychological stereotypes, females' pain tends to be judged as less intense than males' pain. We investigate whether medical decision makers give less pain treatment to female than to male patients. To answer this question, we analyze medical datasets on patients arriving with pain complaints at emergency departments in two countries (N = 21,851). In both countries, we find that physicians are 10-20% less likely to prescribe pain-relief medications to females than to males. This sex disparity remains significant even after adjusting for patients' reported pain score, and for numerous patient, physician and emergency department variables. The disparity is observed among both male and female physicians. It is also reflected in additional pain management measures: nurses are about 10% less likely to record pain scores for female than for male patients, and female patients wait about 30 minutes longer for discharge from the emergency department. A controlled experiment supports the suggested mechanism, demonstrating via a clinical vignette that nurses (N=109) judge females' pain as less intense than that of males. The findings provide converging evidence for a bias against female patients in real-life pain management decisions. We discuss the troubling societal and medical implications of this bias, and call for policy interventions to ensure equal pain treatment.

