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2013

Chaperones for Pap smears: do Australian GPs offer or use them?

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Publication Details

Stanford, L., Bonney, A. & Ivers, R. (2013). Chaperones for Pap smears: do Australian GPs offer or use them?. 2013 PHC Research Conference Abstracts (pp. 193-193). Primary Health Care Research & Information Service: Australia.

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Keywords

offer, gps, australian, do, smears, them, pap, chaperones

Disciplines

Medicine and Health Sciences | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

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Women and men's health

85 Chaperones for pap smears: do Australian GPs offer or use them?

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Aims and rationale

Pap smears are commonly performed in general practice. The use of chaperones for Pap smears has been studied overseas, but there have been no studies published about this in the Australian general practice context. This recent Australian study aims to assist in informing chaperone policy.

Methods

The data collection tool was informed by a literature review and reference to previous international instruments. GPs in NSW were invited to participate by completing either an online or paper questionnaire. Analysis was undertaken using logistic regression.

Findings

From 843 invitations, 263 GPs (31%) responded: 46.6% (n=122) female and 56.5% (n=148) aged over 45. Of all respondents, 68% never or rarely 'offered' a chaperone for Pap smears; 79% never or rarely 'used' one; 15.2% always 'offered' a chaperone and 10.2% always 'used' one. Associations for increased chaperone use included male gender of GP ($p<0.01$); medical degree from outside Australia ($p=0.03$); GP age <45 yrs ($p<0.01$).

Implications of research

Many countries have clear guidelines for the use of chaperones for intimate physical examinations. The Australian Medical Board and Australian Medical Council have no guidelines for chaperone use in their Code of Conduct for Doctors. Major Australian professional indemnity insurers advise members that chaperone use for intimate physical examination is recommended. As the gender and cultural mix of the GP workforce changes, medico-legal policy development will need to be cognisant of these factors. Our study provides useful data for guideline and policy development.

Professor Andrew Bonney is a general practitioner on the NSW South Coast and Roberta Williams Chair of General Practice at the Graduate School of Medicine, University of Wollongong. He has been involved in undergraduate and postgraduate general practice education since 1997.