

How Can Female Gynecologists Be More Sensitive to Women's Modesty?

Before modern medicine was established in the 1800s, male medical personnel were not allowed to be present at births or other procedures that dealt with the intimate parts of women due to religious doctrine. Midwives took care of gynecological needs.

Once the field of medicine and the arena of pregnancy and childbirth were usurped by modern medicine – all doctors, including obstetricians were men. Medical schools would not admit women for a number of years. The first female doctor to graduate from medical school was Elizabeth Blackwell back in 1849, although it took more than a century and a half for female doctors to be considered “normal.” Check out the historical progression of pelvic exams at the article, **Male physicians treating Female patients: Issues, Controversies and Gynecology** at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3296153>.

For many years, women had to endure male gynecologists because female gynecologists were rare. Fortunately, in the past 20 years there has been a big increase in these female doctors.

Overall, women are comfortable with male doctors and male nurses for non-intimate procedures. For example, many women choosing a female gynecologist would oftentimes welcome a male orthopedic surgeon for knee surgery.

Most big cities with 100,000 or more in population have at least one all-female ob/gyn practice that can guarantee a woman her baby will be delivered by a female doctor or midwife. In some big cities specialty female doctors—such as gynecologic oncologists—are rare or non-existent. Women facing gynecological cancers should always have the option of a female specialist.

A woman from Minnesota required a hysterectomy, but she did not want general anesthesia and she wanted a 100 percent guarantee for an all-female surgery team; also, that her husband be present for the surgery. Her first female gynecologist said those wishes could not be accommodated. This patient decided to find another female gynecologist. This doctor was wonderful because she worked with her hospital's administration to accommodate that patient's wishes. We need more female gynecologists willing to accommodate patients' wishes for modesty.

Here are a few examples of female gynecologists who are not sensitive to modesty:

- 1.) A lady required a C-Section and requested that no medical students be present and her female gynecologist ignored her wishes. Because of this bad experience, she decided to not have any more children.
- 2.) A lady chose a female gynecologic oncologist from an all-female practice to do her hysterectomy. This lady made clear that she wanted an all-female team for her surgery and her wishes were ignored. When she expressed how upset she was that there were

male nurses and anesthesiologist present for her surgery, her gynecologist argued that they were professionals.

We encourage all female gynecologists to work on being more sensitive to patients' modesty. Below are some tips to use as a guide.

Tips for Female Gynecologists:

- 1.) Consider starting an all-female practice in an area that does not have an all-female practice. Keep that practice separate from other practices utilizing and rotating with male doctors. It is important for a woman to have the choice of an all-female practice and a guarantee that her baby be delivered by a female provider.
- 2.) Consider putting a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the exam door so other medical personnel do not randomly enter during intimate exams.
- 3.) Let the woman have the choice of who she wants to be present for her exams. Some women have expressed they prefer no nurse present. One woman stated her wishes for the nurse assisting her gynecologist instead stand at her head rather than watching during the pelvic exam / pap smear.
- 4.) Work to give women maximum modesty for procedures. For example, an abdominal ultrasound should be used as much as possible instead of a transvaginal ultrasound.
- 5.) Never push a woman to accept medical students.
- 6.) Don't argue with women that they should accept male medical personnel because they are professionals or very skilled.
- 7.) Keep in mind that most women who have gynecological cancers care about their modesty and dignity.
- 8.) Always have a list of female gynecologic oncologists you can refer women to if it is suspected that they have cancer.
- 9.) During general anesthesia patients continue to expect dignified care. For these modest patients who require surgery at a hospital or an outpatient surgery center commit to helping them get an **all-female surgical team**. Be open to using local or regional anesthesia whenever possible. This allows the patient to remain awake and alert during a procedure. It would give that modest patient peace of mind. Also, they should have the option of having a personal advocate such as their husband present.