

Women beware: Caring too much can be deadly, say health experts

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Women are still the world's dominant caregivers but they increasingly fail to care for themselves - with deadly consequences, according to experts presenting at an international health conference this week.

Associate Professor Patricia Davidson, from the University of Western Sydney's School of Nursing and co-convenor of the International Council on Women's Health Issues (ICOWHI) Congress says a range of forces like work and family pressures are placing extra stresses on women's health and well being - putting them at higher risk of diseases and illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer.

"There is an inherent resilience among women which has served them well, but rapid social changes have placed an increasing burden on women which threatens their individual health, and global trends of increasing life expectancy," says Associate Professor Davidson.

"Statistics reveal that worldwide, women now make up a third of the labour force, but perform two thirds of the working hours for just a tenth of the income.

"Although greater social participation has brought some advances in women's health and well being, there remain clear inequities for females from birth to death," she says.

"Globalisation has increased access to education, information and resources - enhancing the position of women in society - but the blurred

gender roles have left women continuing to carry the burden of primary care givers in the family and in society."

Associate Professor Davidson says in the past there has been a preoccupation with women's reproductive health, but now women's health issues around the world are more wide ranging particularly in the increasing rate of chronic diseases.

"Despite the cultural, political and economic differences between nations, women are facing similar health challenges such as cardiovascular disease, cancer and problems related to ageing, sexuality and violence," she says.

"And while female life expectancy remains greater than males, women are increasingly falling victim to the consequences of the negative side of a modern lifestyle - obesity, decreased physical activity and smoking - with the deadly result being heart disease."

The Heart Foundation's NSW Director of Cardiovascular Health and Co-Chair of the 'Cardiovascular Disease in Women' session at the ICOWHI Congress, Julie-Anne Mitchell, says the international gathering is an excellent opportunity to raise awareness about the high incidence of chronic conditions such as heart disease, among women.

"More often than not heart disease is perceived as the old man's disease. However, research shows this is a stereotype," says Ms Mitchell.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data shows heart disease is responsible for almost 18% of all deaths in Australian women. On average, heart disease kills about 220 women per week or 31 Australian women each day. A survey conducted on behalf of the Heart Foundation found that only three per cent of Australians are aware that heart disease is the leading cause of death in women.

"The Heart Foundation is pleased to see that researchers are now focusing on the issue of women and cardiovascular health and putting the subject high on the health agenda."

Delegates attending the Congress will also hear how health and social programs effective in one country may be successful around the world - saving time, money and lives.

Associate Professor Davidson says improving the quality of life for all women could be as simple as sharing knowledge and solutions.

"By sharing the burden of resolving these problems we can also share the solutions - there are many more similarities confronting health and community workers than differences.

"The health and well being of women clearly impacts on the entire community -their health should be permanently on the world's radar screen."

At the conclusion of the Congress, the International Council on Women's Health Issues will formulate a 'White Paper' outlining global strategies for improving women's health and well being.

Further information on the conference, including the program of presentations can be accessed from the official website:

www.icowhi2006.com

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