

Cervical smears can be humiliating and stressful, study says

November 18 2011

Women's personal testimonies of cervical smear testing in the UK show that their experiences are often far from positive, says a new study from the University of Leicester published today in the international journal *Family Practice*.

The study reveals the stress, anxieties, as well as pain that [women](#) can suffer when they undergo the test, which involves taking cells from the [cervix](#) using special instruments. Women say that they are not always treated with the kindness and sensitivity that they would like. Complaining that healthcare professionals can appear detached and distanced, women say they would prefer a much more personal approach.

Researchers from the Department of [Health Sciences](#) at the University of Leicester wrote the paper in collaboration with colleagues at Glasgow Caledonian University, interviewing 34 women about their experience of undergoing cervical smear tests. The research was funded by an MRC Health Services Research Studentship

Dr Natalie Armstrong, Lecturer in Social Science Applied to Health at the University of Leicester, said: "Attitudes towards cervical smears remain something of a paradox. On one hand, screening appears to command impressive levels of public support - as demonstrated by campaigns to widen the eligibility criteria - but on the other hand there is considerable evidence suggesting that individual women find the experience of the screening test problematic."

Commenting that women in her interviews emphasised the highly intimate and personal nature of the test, she explains that many women report unsatisfactory experiences. "Women can feel passive, helpless and vulnerable in the face of a situation where they risk pain and discomfort, shame and humiliation, and violation and [invasion of privacy](#)," said Dr Armstrong. One interview stated "It's just so cold. You go in, you take your clothes off, she does that and I mean it's just so, it's just so degrading and embarrassing. It's just horrible."

Women often report feeling disappointed with the way the procedure is conducted, especially if healthcare professionals act as though the smear test is a routine procedure.

"Ignoring women's fears, anxieties and concerns can appear to deny the reality, or at least the validity, of women's emotional responses. There is unlikely to be a 'one size fits all' solution in terms of what specifically health professionals need to do to better support women, but explicitly asking women about their expectations of the screening encounter and whether they have any worries or concerns may help to surface issues that the health professional and woman involved can then seek to tackle together", said Dr Armstrong.

More information: Armstrong N, James V, Dixon-Woods M. (in press) The role of primary care professionals in women's experiences of cervical cancer screening: a qualitative study. Family Practice [DOI: 10.1093/fampra/CMR105](#)

Provided by University of Leicester

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