

GenderBasic:

Promoting attention to sex and gender in life sciences research in Europe

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BACKGROUND

In 2002, the European Commission implemented a new policy to promote attention to the gender dimension in EU funded research. This policy (see box 1) has implications for (basic) research in the life sciences, as both sex differences and/or gender effects can be relevant in a particular research project.

Life sciences projects funded by the EU Sixth Framework Programme (FP6) had to meet the following criteria:

- Research proposals must include a description of how attention to sex and/or gender differences will be integrated in the content of the research
- Research consortia must report on the implementation of these plans in progress reports to the Commission.

For many scholars in the life sciences, reflecting on the potential relevance of sex and gender issues for the content of their research presents a new challenge.

AIM GENDERBASIC

GenderBasic has the aim to examine:

- how the EU gender equality policy impacts the content of basic, preclinical and clinical research funded by FP 6
- which services the EU may offer to enhance the possibilities of researchers to integrate attention to sex and gender differences in basic, preclinical and clinical research

PLANNED ACTIVITIES

- An assessment of facilitating and inhibiting factors for the incorporation of attention to sex differences and/or gender effects in basic, preclinical and clinical research among selected FP6 life sciences research projects.
- An assessment of facilitating and inhibiting factors for the incorporation of attention to sex differences and/or gender effects in basic, preclinical and clinical

research among research coordinators of acclaimed European research Institutes in the life sciences (e.g., Karolinska, Max Planck)

- The production of topical papers by experts, describing best practices and possible solutions for identified methodological and conceptual issues: (e.g. equitable inclusion men and women, sub group analyses data, sex-gender interactions)
- A meeting for researchers and experts to reach consensus about proposed solutions on issues regarding the incorporation of attention to sex differences and/or gender effects in the content of basic, preclinical and clinical research. (September 2006)
- The development of tools to advise EU services, researchers and research evaluators on how to improve attention to the gender dimension in basic, preclinical and clinical research.

EXPECTED RESULTS

- Tools to be used by EU services, researchers and research evaluators for the improvement of attention to the gender dimension in basic, preclinical and clinical research
- Recommendations on how to further implementation of the gender equality policy for research in the EU 7th Framework Programme (2007-2013)

FURTHER INFORMATION

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EU RESEARCH POLICY

The EU gender equality (GE) policy for improving scientific excellence of research is based on two combined objectives:

- Promoting the participation of women scientists in Framework Programme activities at all levels (WP)
- Ensuring that the gender dimension is properly addressed in EU-funded research content (GD)

This policy can be symbolically represented by the following simple formula: GE=GD + WP

(European Commission, Research Directorate-General, Directorate C - Science and society: Women and science: GENDER ACTION PLANS: A COMPENDIUM OF GOOD PRACTICES, December 2005)

EVERY CELL HAS A SEX

Whether a cell contains an XX or an XY chromosome may have an impact on everything from regulation of gene expression in a cell line to the efficacy or toxicity of a pharmaceutical in a living human (BMJ 2005;330:1170(21May))

SEX MATTERS

Sex, that is being male or female, is an important basic human variable that should be considered when designing and analyzing studies in all areas and at all levels of biomedical and health-related research. Differences in health and illness are influenced by individual genetic and physiological constitutions, as well as by an individual's interaction with environmental and experiential factors. The incidence and severity of diseases vary between the sexes and may be related to differences in exposures, routes of entry and the processing of a foreign agent, and cellular responses. **The study of sex differences is evolving into a mature science.** There is now sufficient knowledge of the biological basis of sex differences to validate the scientific study of sex differences and to allow the generation of hypotheses. The next step is to move from the descriptive to the experimental and establish the conditions that must be in place to facilitate and encourage the scientific study of the mechanisms and origins of sex differences.

(IOM, Does Sex Matter? 2001)

...AND GENDER MATTERS

There is a growing body of scientific evidence (both quantitative and qualitative) that gender, as a socially constructed distinction, can reinforce, counteract or work independently of biological sex. Risk factors, biological mechanisms, clinical manifestation, causes, consequences of disease and disorders may differ in men and women. In such cases diagnosis, prevention, treatment and management need to be adapted according to **sex and gender**. Consequences for not doing so impinge on the health of both women and men. (FP6 Thematic priority 1.1.1 Life sciences, genomics and biotechnology for health)

RESEARCH

Effective inclusion of the gender dimension in health research can only be accomplished if potential sex and gender differences are taken into consideration in each step of the research plan: preliminary review of the problem, research questions and design, tools for data collection, data collection, data analysis, interpretation, language and concepts, conclusion and implications (Klinge & Bosch, Gender in Research 2001, EUR 20017)