

IS MEN'S HEALTH A WOMEN'S ISSUE?

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank you for the invitation to speak here before you within these hallowed walls. Congratulations as well on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the Moscow International Association of Women.

When we speak of preserving knowledge in order to pass it on to future generations, when we speak of education and culture – much of the subject of the talks and presentations today, there truly is no more fitting place than in these rooms of this historical library.

Our conference theme – women's issues – is inseparable from healthcare issues. Healthcare in many countries is indeed a women's issue. In Estonia, for example women comprise 95% of healthcare workers. I cannot recall the last time I saw a male nurse.

The choices that determine a family's health are also made by and large by women – what we eat, how well we eat, how we spend time together – slouching in front of a television set or a computer screen or outside getting physical exercise in the fresh air.

Men's Health – Also a Women's issue?

Recently in Estonia we have started to stress that men's health is in fact also in women's hands. Beginning with teaching and raising our boys, forming men's life-styles,... even to forcing men to go to the doctor. In fact, in speaking about women's health we perhaps should concentrate on men's health. Because life spent with a television couch potato undoubtedly affects a woman's health. For they leave us as widows, dying ten years before we do.

In Estonia young men between the ages of 20 and 39 have a mortality rate four to five times the mortality rate of women in the same age group. The difference derives primarily from accidents, violence, alcohol, narcotics use and suicides. As a result, over half the childless women over 35 report they are childless not for economic or career reasons but because they lack a suitable partner with whom to raise a family. These women's potential partners have died young. (Source: Tartu University Women's Clinic study of sexual health and behaviour, 2007)

Health. What is it?

Health is by no means merely a medical issue. Medicine and medical care are largely merely a matter of trying to deal with sad consequences.

Modern medicine maintains that health is a condition of mental, physical and social well-being. The latter is considered in contemporary medicine regarding men's health as possibly the most important component. That is to say, that one of the most important roles in a man's health is played by social relations and life-style. To put it concretely: Does a man go drinking „with the boys“, or does he go regularly to the gym?

Dumb optimism or lack of knowledge?

An ongoing longitudinal study by Professor Mikk Titma of Stanford University, begun in 1966, shows in its most recent analyses quite remarkable results: 30 year-old men and women evaluate their health more or less similarly, but after 40 evaluations diverge markedly. Men in their 40s become much more optimistic (and unrealistic) than women. Objective indicators such as the Body Mass Index or BMI indicate that 60 percent of men over 40 are overweight as opposed to 30 percent of women in the same age group. That is to say, women evaluate the state of their health far more adequately and feel obliged to deal with their weight problem. At the same time a fat, self-satisfied man amidst others like him enjoys an illusory well-being and believes that things are in fact good.

It seems that male consciousness fails to make a connection between being overweight and disease. This is the beginning of their decline. Diseases, which for a long time are not expressed or noticed, become apparent only when they reach a far more developed stage. Then they already are a threat to the rest of ones life, involving expensive drugs, threatening

our families, our medical insurance and the national healthcare budget. Type 2 diabetes, cardio-vascular diseases, tumours, cirrhosis of the liver... are all largely avoidable and preventable by our own life-style choices.

It's not at all unusual for a man asked by his doctor how his cholesterol indicators are, to respond „what are those?" It seems it is too complicated for a man to understand the connections between a beer-belly, the nature of the endocrine secretions of belly fat and a decrease in virility. Let alone that erectal dysfunction is warning: in 5 to 7 years you are likely to have a heart attack, for arteriosclerosis begins just there...

When we said that close relations are of crucial importance for men's health, then physical intimacy, sexual relations are an especially important part of close relations. When these suffer, then the relationship suffers as well. This in turn has a strong impact on self-esteem and from there on to psychological well-being.

How to save the Male?

We know that influencing an adult male's life-style is almost impossible. Moreover, there is so much that needs to change: the food men eat, the way they spend their free time, interpersonal relations. It seems, ultimately that we have to start in childhood. We need to think that perhaps our health education is too girl-centered.

Would it help if there were more male teachers or male nurses?

Or that men's magazines treated health issues more seriously, warning middle-aged men about life-style issues?

Should we engage opinion-makers to be more visible?

Unconventional marketing of health issues?

The mission for women

For women as the ones who give us life and sustain it, the term „Mission: Impossible" does not exist. There are places where change has worked. In London City or the Financial district of New York you see fewer and fewer overweight or smoking men. For well-educated, successful men health and well-being is no longer a topic just for women.

In the recent past, a man's most important role was similar to the caveman's: to fight and bring home as large a prize as possible. Nowadays we have stored up quite a bit. More important than the fight today, is a feeling of security. Caring. Caring for what has been accomplished. Caring for each other. Caring for our surroundings.

And to conclude egoistically: if women wish to care about themselves, they need to care about their men.

Thank you.