

Research in Women's Health: History and Importance

1843: Scientists learn that conception occurs in human reproduction when the sperm enters the female egg. Prior to this it was assumed that men created life and women served as incubators.

19th Century: Women's health defined by adding women's reproductive system to the male model. No consideration given to the idea that differences may exist between men and women.

1920: The Nineteenth Amendment is ratified, giving women the right to vote.

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1977- The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) bars women of child-bearing potential from participating in most early phase clinical research.

1985- A U.S. Public Health Service task force concludes that exclusion of women from clinical research was detrimental to women's health.

1986- The National Institutes of Health (NIH) adopts guidelines urging the inclusion of women in NIH-sponsored clinical research.

1980s: The Society for Women's Health Research formed. Members included researchers, activists, doctors and nurses, convinced the health of American women was at risk due to biases in biomedical research.

1990: The General Accounting Office (GAO) is asked to examine whether NIH is following its 1986 guidelines. The GAO report reveals that the NIH guidelines are not being followed. The Physician's Health or "aspirin" study, designed to examine the impact of taking aspirin on cardiovascular disease, is one of many large studies in which women were not included.

1990: The Congressional Caucus on Women's Issues introduced the Women's Health Equity Act (WHEA) of 1990, including twenty separate bills to improve women's health research, access to health care, and disease prevention services. WHEA's chief Senate sponsor, Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD), added a provision creating an Office for Women's Health Research (OWHR) at NIH.

1991: The Office on Women's Health (OWH) in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was established to improve the health of American women by advancing and coordinating a comprehensive women's health agenda addressing health care prevention & service delivery, research, public and health care professional education, and career advancement for women in the health professions and in scientific careers.

1993- The NIH Revitalization Act mandates that the NIH must ensure that women and members of minorities and their subpopulations are included in all human subject research.

1993- The FDA rescinds earlier guidelines barring the participation of women with child-bearing potential from most early phase research.

1996 – DHHS Office on Women's Health establishes National Center's of Excellence in Women's Health multidisciplinary health model program. Provides grants for academic medical & community health centers.

2000- The GAO concludes that although women are now included in clinical research proportionate to their representation in the population, analysis by sex of subjects is rare.

2001- The GAO concludes FDA not effectively monitoring research data to determine how sex differences affect drug safety and effectiveness.

2009 – The Office of Research on Women's Health launches a series of series of four regional scientific workshops and public hearings to ensure that research on women's health continues to be on the cutting edge of science, and based upon the most advanced techniques and methodologies.

Compiled by the VCU Institute for Women's Health www.womenshealth.vcu.edu References available upon request