Improving Women's Health Care:
The Experiences of Women Patients and General Practitioners in the Western Region of Melbourne

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This paper documents two studies conducted in the western metropolitan region of Melbourne, which developed from concerns expressed by some women about sexually intrusive medical practices. They aimed to explore women's experiences, as well as general practitioners' views of their practices with women. Following a survey of 472 women, 13 semi-structured interviews were held with respondents who had reported negative experiences with medical examinations. All had experienced something about which they felt uncomfortable, but few had felt able to take action at the time or afterwards. Long-term consequences included impairment of subsequent relationships with health professionals, with implications for the women's ongoing health maintenance, and in some cases, severe emotional disablement.

Concurrently, 12 interviews were conducted with general practitioners to explore issues of concern to them in working with women patients on sensitive issues. These interviews indicated that general practitioners were concerned about issues they perceived to be on the boundary of medical practice, including emotional and psychological issues for women, sexuality and sexual relationships. The study found differences between men and women general practitioners in their responses to women's health issues. The interviews also suggested that the structures of medical practices posed barriers for doctors in developing good practice models.