THE USE OF HORMONE REPLACEMENT THERAPY AND MENOPAUSAL HEALTH NEEDS OF WOMEN IN TAIWAN

Chao-Yuan Wu
Master of Science

Griffith School of Environment
Science, Engineering, Environment & Technology Group
Griffith University

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Abstract

The use of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) has been surrounded by controversy regarding drug safety and to what extent it meets the health needs of menopausal women. HRT became the prevailing treatment in Western medicine for women with menopause-associated complaints, but a huge worldwide reduction in use began in July, 2002, following the release of the Women’s Health Initiative (WHI) reports warning of its risks. The implications of this large reduction on the health needs of menopausal women have not been fully appraised, particularly from the perspective of the women affected. This brings into question whether HRT use actually meets the health needs of menopausal women, and, indeed, what their health needs are.

This study investigates the use of HRT by middle-aged women in Taiwan and their menopausal health needs in order to identify these and recommend comprehensive strategies to promote women’s health and well-being. A broad and in-depth exploration of Taiwanese menopausal women’s health needs has been carried out using both quantitative and qualitative methods. As well as examining the allocation and efficiency of health resources associated with menopausal health, it presents and analyses the perspectives of the principal stakeholders of HRT use: women, doctors, health policy decision-makers, women’s health activists and researchers.

The study found that menopausal women in Taiwan have significant health needs. In each month of the study period (2000–2004 inclusive), over 60% of the middle-aged women insured with the National Health Insurance (NHI) Scheme utilised NHI-subsidised medical services. Moreover, these women frequently consulted doctors and medical specialists in different fields, indicating that they also had unmet health needs.

By 2004, a mere 5% of women adhered to three or more courses of HRT. The consistent proportion of ambivalent users—those only prescribed between three and five courses a year—over the study period also indicates unmet needs among women who, after being prescribed and taking HRT, discontinued its use, because of the WHI reports or for other unspecified reasons. The rising percentage of traditional Chinese medicine consultations and the concurrent fall in the percentage of gynaecology consultations implies a reluctance or even a resistance to HRT.
National HRT medication costs experienced a significant decrease after the WHI trials, a decrease which continued until 2008. The NHI expenditure on HRT medication in 2004 for the resistant users—those only prescribed one or two courses—was three times the Bureau of Health Promotion budget for all other menopausal health programmes in the same year and over six to eight times the budgeted figures in the years after 2004. This reflects an inefficient allocation of valuable and limited health resources.

The study presents its findings of the perspectives of the interviewed women, doctors and experts on women’s health, women’s health activists, and government policy makers regarding menopausal women’s health needs. The key findings regarding the menopausal health needs of middle-age women in Taiwan can be summed up in six points: (1) they seek clarifying information to ease worries and uncertainties about menopausal symptoms, and their health; (2) they want effective solutions to deal with menopausal distress; (3) the majority prefer natural regimes to HRT; (4) many are concerned with issues relating to their quality of life resulting from ageing; (5) most want to access to impartial information about their health and related issues, such as medication risks and effectiveness; and (6) social support to help them go through the transition associated with menopausal distress and midlife turmoil.

There is a significant gap between the ‘supply’ and ‘demand’ sides of menopausal healthcare: women and doctors have different priorities regarding menopausal health concerns. Doctors see the prevention of chronic disease as a priority of health services for menopausal women, in contrast to the priorities reflected in women’s seeking medical help primarily for irregular menstruation, vasomotor symptoms, vaginal dryness, and insomnia. The gaps between healthcare provision and women’s menopausal health needs are significantly due to providers and decision-makers delivering NHI healthcare services without an adequate understanding of women’s healthcare needs and preferences.

The study found that women became more concerned about the risks of taking medication but their wanting information about alternative health care and preventive health regimes was rarely catered to during clinic encounters. This study recommends that the health sector must work in collaboration with other relevant sectors: to promote healthy ageing in general; to develop policy and programs that provide menopausal women greater access to information, networking, resources and decision making; and finally, to improve
communications between service providers and women in order to provide appropriate and efficient healthcare services.

This study has comprehensively analysed Taiwanese women’s menopausal health needs and added another dimension to the current debate regarding HRT use by middle-aged women. It argues against routine and indiscriminate prescription of HRT and goes beyond examining the dichotomy between bio-medical and ‘natural’ approaches to include an assessment of HRT related public health resource allocations and their efficiency. More importantly, its analysis of the gap between women’s health needs and health care provision encompasses examining these from the perspectives of the users, the providers and relevant stakeholders. This study will thereby contribute to the still ongoing debate in the international literature on the use of HRT. Moreover, it provides evidence demonstrating the importance of adopting a needs-based, women-centred, holistic health promotion approach to promoting the health and well-being of menopausal women. In the context of a rapidly greying world with an increasing trend toward medicalising ageing, this study points to a viable more gender sensitive and sustainable model for the future.

Key words: Hormone replacement therapy, Menopause, Needs assessment, Health promotion, Taiwan
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

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