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Medical research still a men's game and this needs to change, says top Australian clinical trials researcher, anaesthetist Professor Kate Leslie.

Medical research is still largely conducted by men, on men and for men, and more women need to be recruited for clinical trials, according to one of Australia's top clinical trial researchers.

Professor Kate Leslie AO, specialist anaesthetist, internationally renowned anaesthesia researcher and president of the Australian Medical Council (the national standards body for medical education and training) says a co-ordinated and collaborative approach is urgently needed with government and institutional support to ensure a fair representation in research studies.

"In my professional area of anaesthesia and perioperative medicine, women and men present with very different burdens of disease, but research about the effects of these differences is lacking," she says.

Professor Leslie is speaking about gender and research at the 2022 ANZCA Annual Scientific Meeting, which is being held in virtual format from 29 April to 3 May. More than 1200 anaesthetists and specialist pain medicine physicians have registered for the meeting.

Professor Leslie is head of research in the Department of Anaesthesia and Pain Management at the Royal Melbourne Hospital and a past president of the Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA).

She is the lead author of a new analysis of eleven international perioperative medical research studies which found that female participants were in the minority in each study. The average rate of female participation was 42 per cent and the lowest recorded was 36 per cent.

While female participants were healthier, with lower rates of smoking, cardiovascular disease and vascular surgery, the incidences of death, heart attacks, stroke and surgical site infection were similar in male and female participants.

"In general they were healthier at the baseline than male participants, but incidences of death and major complications at 30 days were comparable. What this means is that more women need to be recruited to perioperative clinical trials and we need to understand why they seem to be at lower risk but still experience the same incidences of adverse outcomes," she explains.

"Women are less likely to experience complications overall but women fare worse after cardiac and vascular surgery and are actually more likely to suffer strokes and need further urgent surgery. Stronger participation of women in research leadership, from government through institutions to trial steering groups is vital," she says.

One solution would be for researchers and participants to demand adequate attention to the recruitment of women before becoming involved in clinical trials. Professor Leslie said it was often difficult to recruit women for clinical research studies because of the burden of unpaid work and family commitments.

“Community members and organisations can help design studies that are more attractive to women and we can educate investigators and trial co-ordinators about unconscious biases that may impair the recruitment of women,” Professor Leslie says.

“Efforts to improve the inclusion of women and girls in medical research have been fragmented, inconsistent, unsophisticated and unenforced and as a result progress is still unacceptably slow.”

The ANZCA Clinical Trials Network has successfully conducted large, international, multicentre trials to definitively answer debated clinical questions within the anaesthesia community. Trials network investigators are world leaders in clinical trial methodology and delivery, and have been awarded more than \$A42 million in competitive research grants.

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