

White men score higher than women on medical school science test, study shows

CHICAGO (AP) — White men score higher than women of all races on the science exam medical students must take to become licensed doctors, and a researcher said cultural obstacles faced by women may help explain why.

Women also may not approach the test as competitively as men, the researcher said.

In a study of more than 10,000 medical students, white men generally did better on the test than all women, even after discounting for differences in their undergraduate education and in scores on medical entrance exams.

White men also did better than men from other racial groups, with Asian-Pacific Islanders being the only group where the difference was not explained by differences in prior education, researchers reported in Wednesday's issue of *The Journal of the American Medical Association*.

The findings suggest either that the test is flawed in some way or that the lower-scoring groups were deficient in the subjects on

which they were tested, said an editorial accompanying the study.

Beth Dawson, a biostatistics professor at Southern Illinois University School of Medicine and the study's lead author, said she believes women may face cultural disadvantages.

"What kind of family support do they have?" she asked, adding that fewer men than women are expected to handle tasks around the house while in school. "They have to get home and ... do their own laundry and housecleaning. And THEN they have to study."

Women also have fewer teachers and role models of their gender helping them succeed, Dawson said.

A third possibility is that women may not strive as hard on the test because they are less likely to seek competitive residencies such as orthopedics and ophthalmology, for which the test is a screening tool, she said.

In 1988, 89.9 percent of white men passed

the test, compared with 86.6 percent of Asian-Pacific Island men; 71.6 percent of Hispanic men; and 53.9 percent of black men.

The same year, 84.1 percent of white women passed the test; 78.9 percent of Asian-Pacific Islander women; 55.8 percent of Hispanic women; and 44 percent of black women.

The exam — Part I of the National Board of Medical Examiners test — deals with sciences such as physiology, biochemistry and microbiology. Doctors must pass all three parts of the test to obtain a license to practice.

The study did not explore Parts II or III, which cover clinical skills. Previous research indicates women do as well as men on Part II, the authors said.

"We really don't know the relationship between performance on (Part I) and the performance of physicians," Ms. Dawson said. She added that many skills, such as questioning and examining patients, have nothing to do with science knowledge.

Results show Lorenzo's oil a possible cure for patients

WASHINGTON (AP) — Lorenzo's oil, the treatment made famous by a movie depicting it as a medical breakthrough for a rare genetic disease, helped some patients when given before symptoms appeared but failed to help others, a study shows.

"This is the first time we have the statistics which seem to show it does help," said Dr. Hugo Moser of the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore, who conducted the study of 50 young boys.

French researchers reported a year ago that the treatment was worthless in adults who already had developed symptoms of the disease. Moser's study had no control group, meaning that it cannot be considered definitive evidence of the treatment's effectiveness.

The oil was effective only in about half of the 50 boys who received it. Two boys died despite the treatment and the condition of others degenerated, Moser reported.

The treatment was made fa-

Treatment for rare genetic disease may help boys in early stage of illness

mous by the 1992 movie "Lorenzo's Oil," starring Susan Sarandon and Nick Nolte as Michaela and Augusto Odone. The Fairfax, Va., couple helped create the substance for their son, Lorenzo, who has the disease, called adrenoleukodystrophy.

Now, even medical journals call the treatment, a mixture of derivatives from natural cooking oil, Lorenzo's oil. The Odones say the therapy stopped Lorenzo's decline and partly reversed it so that the once-vegetative boy, now 16, can communicate slightly using hand movements.

The disease, caused by a genetic defect, destroys the sheath that covers nerve fibers. Women who carry a copy of the bad gene may show some symptoms, but their sons experience the devastating cases.

The most severe form usually hits boys ages 4 to 8, stealing their ability to see and speak in as little as two years and eventually killing them. The adult form progresses more slowly.

The disease affects one or two people in 100,000 in the United States. A hallmark is the buildup of substances in the blood called long-chain fatty acids. Lorenzo's oil returns these levels to normal.

The theory is that these fatty acids enter the brain and cause inflammation that then causes the disease's symptoms.

But Lorenzo's oil, despite accolades by the Odones and other patients, was never proven to work.

Now Moser, once Lorenzo's doctor, has evidence it can fight the disease's progression if given to boys before symptoms appear. "I was very dubious about

it," he admits.

"This confirms statistically the fact that Lorenzo's oil is a helpful preventive," said Mrs. Odone. "It's been there all along, but halleluiah, they're now seeing it."

In the journal *International Pediatrics*, to be published later this month, Moser reported results from 50 boys who have taken Lorenzo's oil anywhere from one to seven years.

Fifty-six percent have remained stable, including one who started taking Lorenzo's oil when he was 10 years old and now, seven years later, is healthy, has normal intelligence and is applying to college.

It didn't always work. Two boys died and several others deteriorated.

Interestingly, brain scans indicated worsening lesions in 14 percent who showed no physical changes. Moser doesn't know if that means Lorenzo's oil made a difference or if the scans just show trouble well before symptoms appear.

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