

Men in Search for Informal Medical Help and Advice

Letters to a German Patients Association for Complementary and Alternative Medicine

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Background: The demand for health-related information has increased enormously among the population of western countries over the past few decades. To fulfil this demand multiple options are available for patients. The spectrum of options not only comprises physicians or paramedical professionals, but also non-medically trained caregivers as well as printed health guides, online portals and various support groups and patients associations. Most of them eagerly offer their advice promising to support the patient on his journey through a pluralistic medical market, where services of both, Biomedicine (BM) and Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) are used and provided on a large scale. Against this background the independent patient association *Natur und Medizin* (NuM) provides professional assistance to its members delivered by academically trained caregivers. Acknowledging the potentials of both BM and CAM, the association focuses on creating more transparency concerning the patient's possibilities of choice. Therefore it explicitly invites its members to contact its academically trained health experts with their health-related questions.

Objectives and Aims of the Study: Between 1992 and 2000 around 8.000 written requests by people seeking medical advice were sent to NuM. Around 20 percent of the letters were analysed with the aim to provide critical insights into today's medical care by taking into account patients' demands, experiences, beliefs and expectations in the context of the German health system in general and of CAM in particular. The study also pursued a gender specific approach by separating and comparing letters from males and females to reveal possible differences or shared characteristics regarding their health-related behaviour. This strategy served to examine the widespread opinion that men, due to their culturally constructed masculine identity, are less concerned about their health and the health of others than women.

Methods: The sample consisted of letters written by people whose surnames started with B, O, R or T, because around 20 percent of German surnames start with one of those initials. The analytical tool combined methods developed in different disciplines: the source-critical methods of history, the text-critical methods of textual linguistics and strategies of qualitative and quantitative content analyses taken from social science. Fur-

thermore, theories and findings of medical sociology were applied to identify, locate and interpret parameters effecting human health-related behaviour.

Results: Concerning the gender ratio, the vast majority of writers were female (→ Fig. 1). This result is not surprising and it can still be assumed that women are generally more interested in health matters and turn more frequently to consulting organisations than men. Regarding males and females separately however, it turned out that their health-related behaviour proportionally did not vary as widely from each other as one might have expected.

Firstly, the interests of those men, who contacted NuM were quite similar to those of the female writers (→ Fig. 2). The majority of their requests dealt with the search for a) information about specific treatments and therapies, mainly from homeopathy and naturopathy; b) addresses, mainly of recommendable doctors and c) an unspecific treatment proposal, that should be adequate for the individual health situation of the writer himself and/or third parties.

Secondly, having asked for the beneficiaries of each letter it turned out that male authors proportionally wrote as often on behalf of someone else as their female counterparts (→ Fig. 3). The relationship of the authors to the persons they wrote for was also analysed: The social network of men was rather limited to the nuclear family, mostly encompassing their partner and children. Women instead had recourse to a broader social environment. This result shows that a strict separation of gender-specific areas of responsibility at least in the context of health and illness of family members does not exist.

Next, the spectrum of diseases the authors suffered from was analysed (→ Fig. 4). In its context gender related differences became most obvious. Nevertheless, diseases of the nervous system and neoplasms were among the three top-rated diseases of both genders.

Besides the spectrum of diseases the sources of information used prior to the written requests were examined (→ Fig. 5). It turned out that the claim that men are less interested in health matters than women does not apply to the authors of the letters. Similar to women, men had taken into account a wide spectrum of different sources of information, whereas academically trained caregivers, newspapers and magazines as

well as health-related literature were used most frequently. Finally, this study took a close look at the health-related treatments the authors had tried before they decided to turn to NuM (→ Fig. 6). Analogous to the prior analytical steps a significant gender gap could not be identified. The three top-rated treatments of both genders consisted of a) BM, which was even used more frequently by men; b) the leading of a healthy lifestyle – e.g. sportive activities, healthy food and the avoidance of alcohol and/or tobacco – mentioned more often by women and finally c) the use of herbal remedies, where merely no difference in regard to gender specific preferences existed.

Conclusion: Although the letters to the patients association were predominately written by women, this study showed that a general lack of interest in health can not be ascribed to all men in general. The male minority among the authors exhibited a striking interest in maintaining, improving and regaining its own state of health mainly impaired by chronic diseases as well as the health of family members. In this context men actively pursued different strategies including the council of doctors and the use of BM treatments as well as CAM therapies, the council of patients associations and the print media. In doing so their health-related behaviour did not significantly differ to that of their female counterparts.

On the one hand the results can be interpreted as a typical example of health promoting behaviour that is said to be characteristic for the particular group of users and supporters of CAM. On the other hand the results may be regarded as an indication for a process of equalisation of male and female health-related behaviour at the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21th century with more far-reaching consequences for debates in the field of public health.

- Selected Bibliography:
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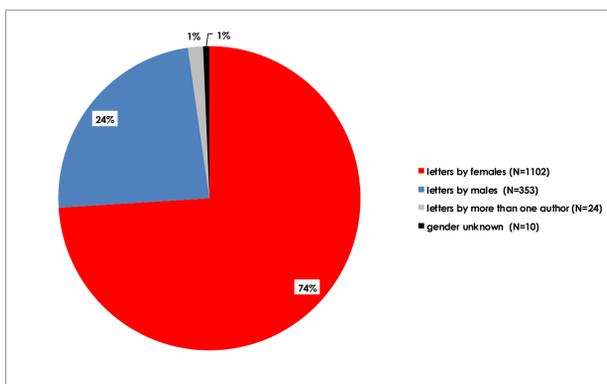


Fig. 1: Gender ratio of authors seeking medical advice from the patients association *Natur und Medizin* (number of letters: 1,489; letters by more than one author as well as letters whose authors' gender could not be identified were not considered for further analyses)

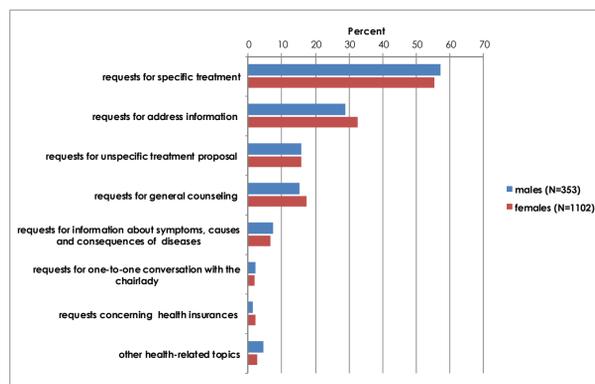


Fig. 2: Reasons for writing (number of letters: 1,455; multiple designations possible)

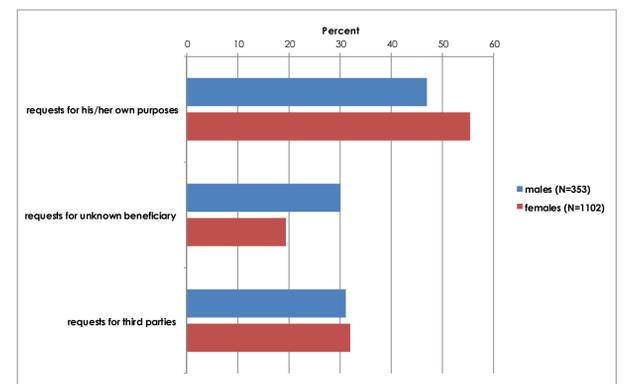


Fig. 3: Beneficiaries of the written requests (number of letters: 1,455; multiple designations possible)

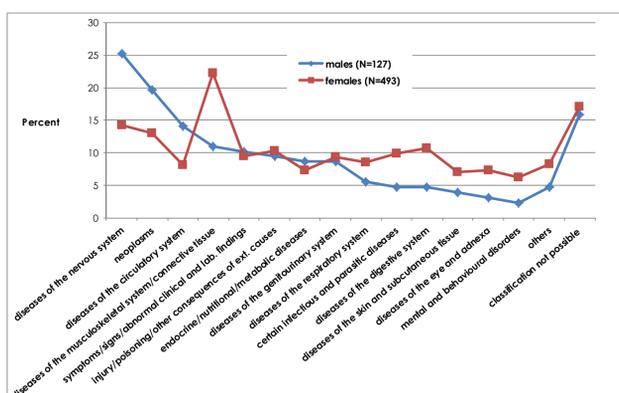


Fig. 4: Spectrum of diseases by reference to the ICD-10 main categories (number of letters: 620; multiple designations possible)

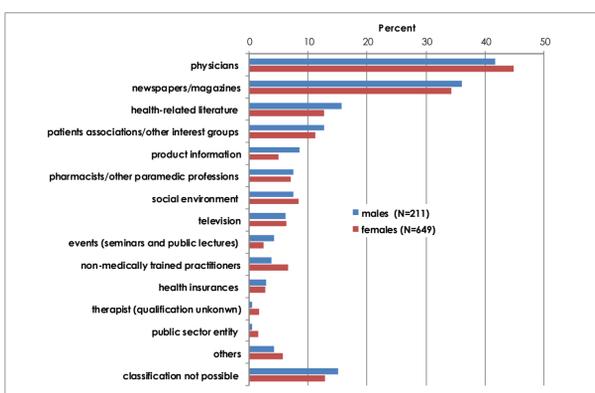


Fig. 5: Sources of information used prior to the written contact with the patients association *Natur und Medizin* (number of letters: 860; multiple designations possible)

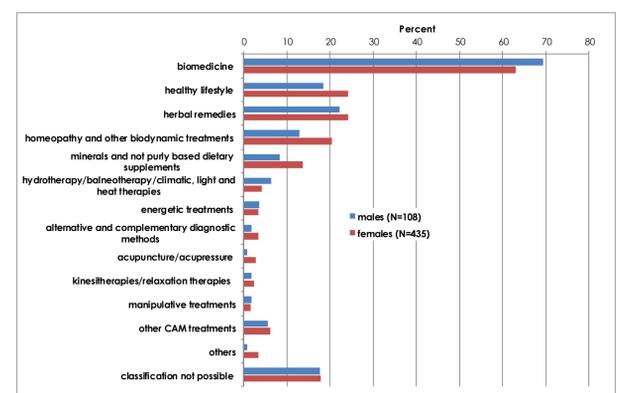


Fig. 6: Health-related treatments tried prior to the written contact with the patients association *Natur und Medizin* (number of letters: 543; multiple designations possible)