

Q&A with Alyson McGregor, MD, author of 'Sex Matters'

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ALYSON MCGREGOR, MD, MA, FACEP, an emergency room physician affiliated with Rhode Island Hospital and The Miriam Hospital, has just published the book, "Sex Matters, How Male-Centric Medicine Endangers Women's Health and What We Can Do About It."

The positive reviews of the book, available in multiple formats, make it seem like a logical choice for a summer reading (or Pandemic) list:

"Artfully relayed through storytelling, Dr. McGregor brings several familiar stories from the emergency department to your living room, showcasing the many ways men and women are different and why each requires tailored medical care. Her personal experiences of a tortuous path of advocacy are the foundation of action steps to help readers to take charge of their own health and change the future of medicine."

— *Basmah Safdar*,
Associate Professor, Yale University,
Sex and Gender Medicine Expert

"Alyson McGregor is a persuasive and intelligent advocate for the unique health care needs of women. The two sexes are significantly different in all the tissues of the body – even to the way the same genes are expressed. An expert in emergency medical care, her deep and informed knowledge of the way disease presents itself in women ensures their prompt and accurate diagnosis and treatment. She is a powerful force in gender-specific health care."

— *Marianne J. Legato, MD, PhD (hon. c.), FACP, Emerita Professor of Clinical Medicine, Columbia University*

And while in-person author events are on hold, virtual ones are a click and conversation away. In the following Q&A, RIMJ reached out to Dr. McGregor to share some of her background and early professional experiences with our readers, as well as her reflections on working in an emergency department during the COVID-19 Pandemic.

RIMJ: Can you tell us a little bit about your formative years growing up in Rhode Island?

DR. MCGREGOR: I grew up in Coventry. I had a wonderful beginning at Fr. John V. Doyle School and La Salle Academy and made lifelong friends at both.

RIMJ: What led you to pursue the field of medicine, and emergency medicine in particular?

DR. MCGREGOR: My father was a RI state police officer. I looked up to him as he worked long hard hours serving the public. I loved science and medicine and thought I would put the desire to help others (and work long hours!) in that way. My mother encouraged me to believe I could accomplish anything with passion and dedication. Becoming an emergency physician was such a natural fit for me. It was that place where you can help people in the critical moments of their lives.

RIMJ: In regards to the role of mentors, who has been the most significant influence on you in your professional life? And in your position at Brown, how is mentorship fostered for students, residents and fellows?

DR. MCGREGOR: Mentorship comes in many forms and I have been so grateful to so many along my path. The person who has been the most influential in my career development and national outreach would be Dr. Marjorie Jenkins. She is the



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BRIEF BIO

Alyson J. McGregor, MD, MA, FACEP

Associate Professor of Emergency Medicine at the Alpert Medical School of Brown University

Co-Founder and Director for the Division of Sex and Gender in Emergency Medicine (SGEM); Director of a SGEM two-year fellowship program and SGEM educational electives for residents and medical students

Co-founder, executive board member, of the national organization Sex and Gender Women's Health Collaborative (SGWHC)

Lead editor for the textbook, "Sex and Gender in Acute Care Medicine" (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Her TED talk, "Why Medicine Often Has Dangerous Side Effects For Women," currently has over 1.5 million views. (www.ted.com/talks/alyson_mcgregor_why_medicine_often_has_dangerous_side_effects_for_women)

Boston University School of Medicine, MD'03, MA'98

current Dean of the University of South Carolina School of Medicine Greenville. We met when I was a junior faculty member at Brown University and she provided sponsorship for pivotal roles in sex and gender education nationally. I was then able to establish novel educational and mentorship programs for medical students, residents and fellows here at Brown University.

RIMJ: Your book “Sex Matters” has just been published, during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Will you be doing any virtual book or TED talks until in-person events are deemed safe?

DR. MCGREGOR: I had a whole schedule of in-person talks, conferences, interviews both in the US and UK for my book launch. Once the pandemic hit, everything was canceled. It was challenging at first but now that the world has adjusted to this new reality that includes distance, I have been enjoying meeting people across the world via Zoom, Facetime and Skype conducting podcasts and webinars. Links to them can be found on my website (<https://www.alysonmcgregor.md.com>) and twitter@mcgregor.md.

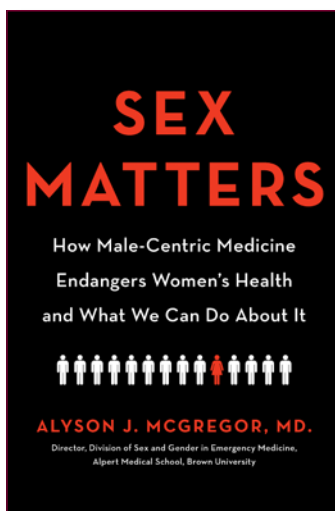
RIMJ: As an ED physician practicing during the COVID-19 Pandemic, do you foresee any future research opportunities regarding gender and COVID-19 in its presentation across demographics, incidence, etc.?

DR. MCGREGOR: As a practicing ED physician during this pandemic, it has clearly been a challenging time. The ED is a place that runs as a community. It takes a lot of people to care for a lot of patients. Now we are all geared up in PPE and it makes connecting with each other and the patients challenging. It has also highlighted some fault lines in medicine and further demonstrates that biological sex can be a critical component to health and disease severity. Many of us are working very hard to fast track important medications and vaccines, but it is crucial to include both men and women in the studies and to analyze the data in a way that can determine if sex differences exist.

RIMJ: When you leave work behind, how do you relax and regenerate?

DR. MCGREGOR: I have a lovely home that is so comforting to me. It's filled with two Portuguese Water Dogs, my husband, lots of gardens and windows... oh, and a wine cellar ☺

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Excerpt from ‘Sex Matters’

As an undergraduate in the University of New Hampshire’s premed program, I took only one elective that wasn’t directly related to my major (or, at least, I thought at the time that it wasn’t related). That course was women’s studies. I loved circling up with other women to talk about the history of women in society and the gender-related issues we faced both individually and collectively. It was illuminating and truly inspiring. When the class ended, and our spirited discussions were replaced in my schedule by yet another biology lab, I felt like a bit of the spark had gone out of my collegiate life.

I didn’t know it at the time, but that course—and the questions about sex, gender, and the female experience it sparked in me—would have a profound influence on the trajectory of my career.

When I finished medical school at the Boston University School of Medicine, I applied for a residency at Brown University in my hometown of Providence, Rhode Island. When my residency ended, I wanted to stay on and work there. Because Brown is an academic institution, I needed to choose a research focus in order to apply for a long-term position. When I sat down and thought about it, the only path I wanted to take was one that would improve the lives and health of women. I wanted to know about women’s bodies and how those bodies affected (and were affected by) modern medicine—in particular, emergency medicine.

At the time, sex and gender research didn’t even exist. My choice to pursue a specialty in women’s health felt like a nod to my feminist beliefs and personal philosophy, a way to keep feeding my passion for women’s issues.

I had no idea just how deep an ocean I was diving into or how many challenges I would face in bringing women’s unique health concerns into the medical mainstream.

When I mentioned to my advisors that I’d like to explore fields related to women’s health, the immediate reaction was, “Oh. You want to do OB/GYN.”

“No,” I’d reply. “I want to study women’s health holistically. As in, the overall health of women.”

No one seemed to know what I meant. That was my first clue about what was really happening in our medical establishment.

As I discovered, and as I’ll share in this book, there is far more to “women’s health” than pelvic exams and mammography. Women are different from men in every way, from their DNA on up. The medical practice of differentiating women from men according to their reproductive organs alone is both reductionist and, as it turns out, hugely problematic—but the male-centric model of medicine is so pervasive in our healthcare systems, procedures, and philosophy that many don’t even realize it exists. Most people simply assume that women’s differences are already being taken into account—yet nothing could be further from the truth.

My research on and passion for this issue has placed me at the forefront of a medical revolution. As a researcher, educator, speaker, and physician, I—and my colleagues in this cutting-edge field—are tasked with integrating emerging information about women’s health into the mainstream medical culture. We are advocates for women and their unique bodies in a system that has largely ignored them, marginalized them, and minimized them. We are women (and a few good men) taking a stand for women in a way that has never been done before. ❖