(S118) BARRIERS TO HEALTH MAINTENANCE AND PROMOTION IN WOMEN WITH MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS IN NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA: A QUESTIONNAIRE STUDY

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Background: Multiple sclerosis (MS) is the most common neurologic disease in young adults. The female-to-male ratio is 3:1, making MS one of the leading causes of disability in women. There is a paucity of literature on health-care issues in women with disabilities. However, in the existing literature it is quite clear that, when it comes to the use of preventive services, such as mammography and gynecologic examinations, women with disabilities access these services at a much lower rate than women without disability. The explanation for this is multifactorial. It is important to identify such issues so that barriers to optimal health can be addressed in women with MS. Objectives: To assess barriers to health maintenance and promotion in women with MS in Nova Scotia, Canada. Methods: This was a questionnaire study designed to collect data on impairment and function as they relate to barriers to health care in women with MS in Nova Scotia, Canada. The questionnaire was mailed to 150 women registered in the Dalhousie University MS Treatment and Research Centre database. Results: Of the 102 respondents, 89% reported that their primary care physicians' offices were wheelchair-accessible from the outside. However, 28.4% reported that the examination table was not accessible, and 30.4% reported inaccessible washrooms. The majority of these individuals reported needing a wheelchair for mobility, but 14% required only an aid for walking. Those in wheelchairs were examined in their wheelchairs most often. A total of 63.7% responded that they were aware of an accessible women's health clinic at our Women and Children's Health Centre; however, only 27.3% were willing to use it. Most who reported they would not use this clinic noted that it was because of distance to travel or transportation issues. Only 16.7% reported being uncomfortable discussing certain topics with their doctors. These were usually related to sexual function and incontinence. A significant portion of respondents (23.5%) expressed an unpleasant interaction with a health professional. Conclusions: Our questionnaire suggests that there are barriers to maintaining optimal health in women with MS in Nova Scotia. Information from this questionnaire could be used to develop strategies to mitigate these problems.

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