



Research shows female and male pain are treated differently, with doctors routinely dismissing women's pain as less serious. *Rosie Mullender* examines a gender bias that may be costing lives

Becca Fowles was rocking back and forth, sobbing with pain, and knew something was seriously wrong. Since her periods had started at 14, they'd been heavy and intensely painful, lasting up to nine days. Her GP had told her they were normal and put her on the pill, which regulated the symptoms. But when she took a break, the pain returned with a vengeance. 'I was 26, and had forgotten how painful my periods could be,' says Fowles, 34, a marketing manager. 'I started wondering, "Is this in my head? Am I making this bigger than it is?"' It was another year before a doctor in Japan, where she was living, diagnosed her with endometriosis – an often agonising disorder in which cells like the ones in the uterus are found elsewhere in the body.

In 2015, Fowles returned to the UK and had her first operation, which revealed scar tissue on her bladder and portions of her bowel stuck to her pelvis. After surgery, her pain worsened, but again, she was dismissed. 'I was told, "It'll heal, it'll be fine,"' she says. 'No one thought something might have gone wrong, or that the pain could be abnormal.' Further surgery revealed that there were patches of endometriosis growing inside her bladder. 'I've had more operations since then, including a pacemaker fitted to help me urinate,' says Fowles. 'I still suffer from chronic pain

in my hip, and there are plans for me to be given steroid injections. I wonder if my pain was taken seriously years ago, doctors could have treated me before things got so severe.'

Fowles is far from alone. On average, it takes a shocking seven and a half years for endometriosis to be diagnosed. But, as well as being a difficult disease to detect, studies show that globally women in pain are treated differently to men – a 'gender pain gap' that puts them at a deadly disadvantage. Worryingly, this bias, responsible for so much suffering for women with gynaecological pain, extends to other types of pain, too.

Studies have shown that women are less likely to receive painkillers, are more often misdiagnosed than men, and even female children's pain is considered less serious than boys. In a US study*, adults were asked to assess a five-year-old's reaction to pain. When they were told the child was called 'Samuel', they assumed it was in more pain than when they were told it was called 'Samantha'. This helps to explain why, from their early years, women are assumed to suffer less pain than men and conditioned to put up with it.

'In general, women are thought to make a lot of fuss about something that's not serious,' says Dr Amanda Williams, a clinical psychologist at University College ►