MEDIA RELEASE

Unconscious sexism in surgery

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Sexism is discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex, the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) has heard today at its Annual Scientific Congress (ASC) in Adelaide.

Dr Katrina Hutchison, a researcher at Macquarie University also asked the question: So what is unconscious sexism?

“Unconscious sexism is when the victim and/or perpetrator are unaware that particular behaviours are sexist or derogatory.

“This behaviour comes about from stereotypes and social attitudes and beliefs that are ingrained into our culture,” Dr Hutchison said.

“Unconscious sexism therefore affects the way women live their lives, what part they play in society and the kinds of opportunities made available to them.”

Dr Hutchison has been studying the impact of this behaviour in the area of surgery and said that unconscious sexism can significantly impact a woman’s career.

“When unconscious sexism affects women in surgery, it potentially also affects women patients both directly and indirectly,” Dr Hutchison said.

“Women enter surgery in low numbers despite being more than half of medical graduates in Australia.

“Sexual harassment, bullying, explicit sexism and women’s caregiving roles could partly explain this fact, but are not the full story.

“Unconscious biases against women can directly impact the quality of consultations, including processes of informed consent.

“They can indirectly affect patients insofar as the limited availability of women surgeons prevents women from seeing the surgeon of their choice.

“Those guilty of bullying and harassment can be sanctioned but unconscious bias is unintended, so most people would agree that sanctions in this case would be unfair,” she said.

Dr Katrina Hutchison’s presentation discussed the strategies required for combating unconscious sexism in surgery.

For more information about the Annual Scientific Congress please visit: www.asc.surgeons.org

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About the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS)

RACS is the leading advocate for surgical standards, professionalism and surgical education in Australia and New Zealand. The College is a not-for-profit organisation that represents more than 7000 surgeons and 1300 surgical trainees and International Medical Graduates. RACS also supports healthcare and surgical education in the Asia-Pacific region and is a substantial funder of surgical research. There are nine surgical specialties in Australasia being: Cardiothoracic surgery, General surgery, Neurosurgery, Orthopaedic surgery, Otolaryngology Head-and-Neck surgery, Paediatric surgery, Plastic and Reconstructive surgery, Urology and Vascular surgery.

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