Pelvic examination for detecting ovarian cancer

I was very disappointed to read Gill Wakyel’s website review in the last issue of the Journal.1 Have we finally abandoned clinical common sense on the altar of guidelines and evidence-based medicine? Nobody with any sense would advise a pelvic examination as a means of detection of ovarian cancer. The main reason for performing a bimanual pelvic examination prior to taking a smear is to enable that examination to be easier and more comfortable for the patient. It enables the smear to be taken from the correct speculum (extra long, virginit, etc.) and hopefully to locate the cervix at the first attempt. How else would one know that the uterus was retroverted and the cervix anterior behind the pubic symphysis? Repeatedly opening and closing the speculum in an attempt to find the cervix is very uncomfortable (I have been on the receiving end!). If one can locate the cervix first time, the procedure is much easier for everybody. I have lost count of the number of women who have said: “Is that all? Last time it took much longer.”

A bad experience having a smear taken is often a reason for patients declining further screening. Of course, all sorts of valuable information can be gained by a pelvic examination. Discomfort can prompt tactful questioning about dyspareunia, which is often not presented as a symptom. If the uterus is enlarged, direct questions about menorrhagia may elicit symptoms that have not been directly complained about. I have even found the odd retained tampon that may account for symptoms. As a hospital gynaecologist, I have on several occasions seen women referred with retained tampons that had not been detected as a specimen often pushes the tampon out of the way but does not discover it.

Then, of course, if one did find an ovarian cyst, would it not be better for the woman if it were found and acted on regardless of whether it is malignant? I will continue to advise trainees that I think the bimanual examination is part of the taking of a smear – but then I don’t write the guidelines!

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