

## Investigating everyday sexism in healthcare: are patient call bells sexist?

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**Aim:** Everyday sexism is receiving renewed attention. Call bells allow patients to summon assistance. Local bells depict a stereotypical female nurse figure. Nursing is historically a female role. Female doctors are mistaken for nurses. This study investigates the imagery on call bells, as a potential example of reinforcing stereotypes and contributing to a misogynistic culture.

**Method:** A descriptive study of hospital equipment using snowball methodology. Data collection via professional contacts on social media. Contacts were requested to provide call bells photo plus location without patient or staff information. Eight week data collection without geographical restriction. Data collected included symbol type, manufacturer, ongoing availability, location

**Results:** 56 responses from 43 hospitals in 8 different countries (Table 1). None excluded.

Table 1:

Image	Number (%)
Gender neutral e.g. red cross	9 (16)
Female figure e.g. figure in dress	16 (29)
Nursing cap/ head	21 (38)
Other inc. button only device	10 (18)
Total	56

It was not consistently possible to identify manufacturers. Where possible, checks were made to ensure the same device is still available to purchase.

**Discussion:** The majority of call bells (67%) used either female images or nursing cap images which are strongly associated with female nurses. This is a significant finding:

- Nurses are not all female
- Nurses do not usually wear dresses and caps
- Reinforcing this stereotype is commonplace
- Call bell symbols are not a clinical priority but their symbols reflect ingrained cultural misogyny
- Changing this stereotype will require designers, manufacturers, suppliers, buyers and users to challenge the existing model.

**Conclusion:** Call bell symbols are an example of everyday sexism in healthcare. They reveal bias in design, manufacture and supply of equipment. Whilst call bells may be a very small part of healthcare, they are indicative of a much wider problem.