Women making a difference:

Jayashri Kulkarni

Julia Medew March 8, 2012

THERE'S a four-month waiting list to get into the Women's Mental Health Clinic at The Alfred hospital and it's easy to understand why. The clinic's founder, Professor Jayashri Kulkarni, has worked hard to create a culture of respect, equality and understanding for patients, which is not always found in other psychiatrists' rooms.

Most of all, staff at the clinic aim to listen to women for at least an hour to hear about their background and the things that trigger their illness, so they can review their case and see whether any hormonal changes or other reproductive factors are at play.

This line of inquiry might seem obvious, Kulkarni says, but to date many women have been treated for mental disorders without taking their biology into account, let alone their gender-specific social roles and the pressures that come with them.

This struck Kulkarni most when she was training in the late 1980s at the old Royal Park Psychiatric Hospital, where some women remained for years receiving inadequate care.

"Some of the stories women told me were amazing; they were making important observations and saying 'I do notice that every cycle, I deteriorate pre-menstrually' and some would talk about deterioration around menopause, but it was always followed up with, 'Oh, I've told so many doctors but they don't believe me,'" she says.

These women prompted Kulkarni to start researching the impact of sex hormones on a person's mental state and vice versa, which led to new hormonal treatments for mental disorders, including the use of oestrogen to treat women of child-bearing age with schizophrenia.

Despite being a significant step forward, she still finds the simple genesis of these treatments staggering.

"The women had said it all and the fact that they weren't listened to makes my blood boil," she says.

While the women's clinic does not have all the answers for everyone, Kulkarni says just listening to patients and making a genuine effort to understand them is improving some women's health.

"It's not about listening and saying 'uh huh' every now and again; it's about actually understanding because within that is validation of that person.

"Many times that sense of being invalidated is so overwhelming and so negative that everything tried for that woman falls flat.

"So that simple act of validating her views can be such a breakthrough and it could just be the thing that empowers her to get on."

While Kulkarni has worked on a large range of research involving males as well, she is best known for her work to help women. Last year, she was instrumental in opening a women-only wing at The Alfred psychiatric unit, enabling women to feel safer and less vulnerable to sexual assault from male patients.

As director of the Monash Alfred Psychiatry Research Centre, she is also researching which contraceptive pills cause depression while examining the impact of anti-psychotic drugs during pregnancy.

On top of her demanding job, Kulkarni has managed to raise two daughters who are now young adults.

"I'm madly in love with my kids and always will be, they give me an enormous amount of undefined love, affection, learning, fun and purpose, but it's always a juggle," she says. "I've done things like flying to Frankfurt for a day so I don't miss a daughter's concert and I pretty much wrote my PhD while sitting in a sandpit playing with my daughter."

Read more: http://www.theage.com.au/national/women-making-a-difference-jayashri-kulkarni-20120307-1ukh4.html#ixzz1oTHVmKAJ