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## CAFÉ

### SCIENTIFIQUE:

#### SEX OR GENDER?

#### WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

## Café Scientifique : *Sex or Gender? What difference does it make?*

By Andrea Papan and Meredith Evans

### What Did We Do?

On September 19, 2011, ACEWH hosted an event on the topic of “*Sex or Gender? What difference does it make?*” at the Company House in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The ACEWH event was funded by the Canadian Institute of Health Research's Café Scientifique initiative. In a relaxed and welcoming environment moderated by Jennifer Bernier of ACEWH, three panelists came together to talk about sex, gender, health, and well-being.

### Who were the panelists?

The panelists included Jim Oulton, Clinical Therapist who worked with Capital Health Community Mental Health Services in Halifax for over 17 years and is now working in BC reviewing Vancouver Coastal Health's Transgender Health program; Blye Frank, Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia and former Professor and Head of the Division of Medical Education at Dalhousie University; and, Barbara Clow, Executive Director of ACEWH and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Health Professions at Dalhousie University. The audience was comprised of 55 students from various disciplines including social work and speech-

language pathology, researchers on gender and sexuality, and community members. Participants listened attentively to the panelists and engaged in a thought-provoking discussion.

### What Was Discussed?

To ignite discussion, the panelists introduced the basic concepts of sex and gender and the important differences between



Barbara Clow, Blye Frank, and Jim Oulton

the terms. Sex refers to biological differences between females and males, whereas gender refers to roles and behaviours that society considers acceptable for women and men. The panelists then explored how these definitions fail to “fit” any one person neatly, and how this is problematic, since health issues are typically directed specifically towards either the male or female sex. The dialogue focused on the importance of framing sex and gender as continua rather than within a restricted binary of male or female. Through examples from their work, Dr.

Clow illustrated the effectiveness of sex- and gender-based analysis in strengthening health research and practice. Dr. Frank talked about the need to break down historic research biases that presume ‘male as the norm’ both with regard to gender dimensions as well by asking ‘*which male is the norm?*’ and how we can gather data from socially and economically diverse populations. In addition, Mr. Oulton identified the importance of understanding gender variance in promoting inclusive health provision for patients who self-identify as neither or both male or female.

After the panel presentations, participants talked in small groups sharing their thoughts with each other for a ten-minute period. From there, a broad discussion ensued with the entire group asking questions and sharing knowledge, offering frank and open insights — producing a dynamic event.

### What was the Feedback?

Feedback on the event was excellent. Participants enjoyed the open and safe atmosphere, and were thoroughly impressed by the passion and knowledge of the panelists.

