

Patients 'less likely to die' if operated on by a woman

By Sarah Knapton

WOMEN have long struggled for equal recognition as surgeons in the male-dominated profession, but a study suggests that they may actually have the upper - and possibly steadier - hand.

Patients operated upon by women are 12 per cent less likely to die in the month following surgery, according to researchers from the University of Toronto who looked at 104,630 procedures between 2007 and 2015.

The reason could be that women may be better at communicating or more willing to follow guidelines, they suggested.

Dr Raj Satkunasivam said: "Women and men practise medicine differently, although little research exists on the differences in learning styles, acquisition of skills, or outcomes for female and male surgeons.

"We don't know the mechanism that underlies better outcomes for patients treated by female surgeons, although it might be related to delivery of care that is more congruent with guidelines, more patient-centred and involves superior communication."

Although around 58 per cent of medical students in the UK are women, just 11 per cent of surgeons are female.

However, the Royal College of Surgeons said that although the study confirmed the "safety, skill and expertise" of female surgeons, patients should not try to choose a surgeon based on sex.

Derek Alderson, RCS president, said: "Surgery is a speciality that continues to struggle with unconscious bias among patients and health professionals, and gender inequality persists.

"However, with so many critical factors to consider, trying to find out why there is a very small difference in short-term clinical outcomes between male and female surgeons is unlikely to prove worthwhile. Nor are we convinced that the sex of the surgeon will emerge as an important determinant of a good outcome for patients."

The research was published in the *British Medical Journal*.

STEL 11.10.17