THE medical school mantra “More is missed by not looking than not knowing” is highly relevant when assessing patients with a vulvar complaint.

There is an assumption among some practitioners that all itching in the vulva is Candida ‘thrush’.

Diagnostic delay with other conditions such as lichen sclerosus can lead to changed anatomy, reduced sexual response and precancerous changes.

It is worth noting that children and adolescents can present with vulvar symptoms.

Many GPs feel awkward performing female genital examinations. It takes training, patience and a caring attitude.

In the hope of providing a swift and pain-free Pap smear or STI swab, the conscientious GP may hurry the procedure and miss a key opportunity to visually assess the vulva.

Likewise, many women find discussing sexual or gynaecological issues with their GP embarrassing. This can lead to undiagnosed or misdiagnosed conditions.

Allow yourself to be comfortable using the patient’s language to discuss her anatomy and use this as an opportunity to educate patients on correct anatomy and terms.

Using anatomical diagrams or charts to educate the fully dressed patient, prior to a genital examination, allows opportunity for her to discuss any symptoms of concern with less embarrassment.

Explaining that a genital examination is as common as an eye test or similar, may normalise the procedure and reduce embarrassment.

If you are not comfortable doing genital examinations get a chaperone or find out if there is someone else you can refer patients to within your practice. Rural doctors should attempt to have at least one person from their practice who is comfortable and experienced in doing these examinations.

**Practice points**

- Do not assume vulvar pruritus is Candida; always look and test.
- Vulvar examination is easy and cost effective, do not forget to do it.
- Exams can be an opportunity to educate women about their vulva; offer a mirror.
- A male GP might consider using a female chaperone.
- Keep an open mind; do not be afraid to refer.

**HISTORY-TAKING**

- Begin with asking about any symptoms like pain, itching (location and how long it’s been present), skin changes, bleeding and if there have been any sexual problems;
- Query family history of autoimmune or thyroid disease;
- Take a sexual history, inquire about contraceptive use and time since last Pap smear;
- Remember to ask about any anal discomfort, anal pruritus and fissures;
- Ask if there is any vaginal discharge or smell; and
- Explain in layman’s terms what is
involved in any test or procedure and ask if this is OK.

EXAMINATION
- Ensure adequate light is available to visually check the outside and inside of the vulva and that the patient is comfortable and adequately draped;
- A magnifying glass lens can be helpful;
- Check for inflammation, pigmentation changes, lumps, rashes, thickened/thinning skin, whitening of skin, papules, warts, masses, lesions, ulcerations and fissures;
- Check for changes in vulvar architecture such as skin fusion over clitoris, fused or absent labia minora or narrowed introitus;
- Don’t forget to examine the anus and perineum;
- Examination is a timely opportunity to educate a women about her vulva; and
- Document all your findings in your notes and remember a diagram can be useful.

ESTABLISH DIAGNOSIS
- Remember, patients may have more than one pathology;
- For some issues, visual inspection will be all that is required to make the diagnosis but, for improved accuracy, a biopsy under local anaesthetic may be required to establish a diagnosis.
- A biopsy is mandatory when malignancy is suspected;
- It is always possible to urgently refer to a specialist practitioner in this case;
- Vulvovaginal itch is often misdiagnosed as Candida. It is important not to make that assumption, always swab both the vagina and vulva; and
- Test for any STI involvement.

RESOURCES FOR CLINICIANS
- Register now for the next free Jean Hailes HP webinar about vulvar conditions at https://jeanhailes.org.au/health-professionals/webinar-library
- http://anzvs.org
- www.bad.co.uk
- http://www.dermnetnz.org/
- http://www.issvd.org/category/providers
- iPhone app available to purchase.

References at medobs.com.au

Jean Hailes for Women’s Health is a national, not-for-profit organisation focusing on clinical care, innovative research and practical educational opportunities for health professionals and women. www.jeanhailes.org.au