

# Women in Medicine: Changing the Culture of Medicine



This four-part series builds on the insights delivered in *Women in Medicine: Setting the Agenda for Change*, a collaboration between Korn Ferry and the American Medical Women's Association, and focuses on the roles of medicine, healthcare organizations, leaders, and physicians in helping women achieve fulfillment and success in their medical careers.

This article offers women physicians strategies and tactics to achieve the following objectives: build resilience, evaluate practice opportunities, gain leadership experience, promote gender equity, practice self-care, and sustain mental wellness.

Women physicians can promote gender equity by supporting other women physicians. They can amplify colleagues' voices, offer support at meetings and events, serve as mentors and sponsors, share opportunities with high-potential women, and ensure flexibility in the workplace. The following are recommendations and action steps.

## **BUILD AND ENCOURAGE RESILIENCE**

*Women physicians can build and sustain resilience throughout their medical careers through these actions:*

- Invest in wellness and well-being via sleep, nutrition, and exercise complemented by practices that encourage reflection, including meditation, prayer, journaling, and yoga.
- Resist the permanence of a crisis by forecasting how you could and will feel in the future.
- Strengthen self-confidence by reflecting on your track record in making decisions, resolving conflicts, solving problems, managing crises, and delivering quality patient care.
- Break overwhelming challenges or long-standing problems into discrete goals, objectives, and manageable, measurable tasks.
- Exercise self-compassion and extend compassion to women physician colleagues who face professional and family issues.

- Release anger, fear, and disappointment by taking breaks to reflect on fresh options and possibilities.
- Build habits of resilience. Rethink challenges, turn to colleagues, and envision positive outcomes.
- Maintain a growth mindset.

## **MEDICAL PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES**

*Seek medical practice opportunities for personal and professional fit and growth.*

- Identify expectations for the first month, 90 days, year, and three to five years.
- Determine where the practice, department, division, or system is headed by focusing on growth and expansion, technology acquisition, service development, and clinical and business targets.
- Uncover how you'll receive feedback via formal performance reviews, coaching, mentoring, and sponsorship.
- Ask about physicians who have excelled in the practice. How do they rate on the dimensions of medical knowledge, skill, experience, and interpersonal style?
- Reflect on the practice opportunity by posing these questions:
  - o Fit: Does the opportunity mesh with your professional and personal goals and needs? Does the work environment fit who you are and who you want to become?
  - o Time: What's the position's time commitment—

daily, weekly, monthly, and annually? Is flexible scheduling available?

o Advancement: How will the position guide and turbocharge your personal and professional growth?

o Support: To what extent does your family and personal and professional network support your decision to interview for and possibly accept the position?

## INCREASE EXPOSURE TO LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE AND OPPORTUNITIES

*Develop pathways to promotion and leadership.*

•Rely on mentors to decode organizational culture. Choose people who differ from you in function, gender, ethnicity, industry, or profession. Tap mentors of all genders to gain insight into diverse perspectives and build relationships.

•Secure feedback from superiors and colleagues. Make sure you receive the same aspirational feedback typically shared with male colleagues along with standard transactional feedback on completed tasks and projects.

"Women physicians need to celebrate each other's achievements," says Eliza Lo Chin, MD, MPH, Executive Director, AMWA. "Each of us can help create a culture within the profession – and workplace – that will empower women to emerge as leaders."

•Ask colleagues and leaders about how you might fit within a division, specialty, team, or task force, including the knowledge, skill, track record, and interpersonal style you need to make the move.

•Showcase your impact on clinical and business performance to gain the attention of influencers and decision makers. Share how your performance and accomplishments drive key strategies and initiatives. Among the questions to ask yourself:

o Where are this organization and the profession of medicine headed?

o Where is my medical career headed?

o How will I contribute to clinical and business performance--within this organization and across the healthcare system?

o Who should listen to my story?

•Expand your network. Develop a network that broadens perspective, and creative thinking. Networks that embrace varied industries, functions, and backgrounds will enhance your access to career and leadership lessons learned and build new connections.

*Consider under-the-radar opportunities to expand knowledge, skill, experience, and communication styles.*

•Consider service on the boards of schools, community groups, start-ups, small businesses, and not-for-profit organizations with a commitment to health and healthcare.

•Participate in a medial mission to underserved areas of the U.S. or foreign countries.

•Volunteer to deliver care, education, and training in free-or low-cost clinics.

•Join local committees and task forces to gain exposure to marketing, finance, operations, design, governance, strategy, technology, research and development, and talent management.

*Become your own best career advocate, while serving as a champion of women physician colleagues.*

•Take pride in advancing your career—and the careers of women physician colleagues. Be a champion and advocate for a preferred position, role, or workplace culture. Articulate how your attitudes, beliefs, and values drive your passion for medicine and healthcare innovation.

•Share your purpose and excitement over clinical care, research, and education with physician colleagues by describing how your work and ideas affect patients, providers, and the community.

•Demonstrate your commitment to the challenges of physician leadership. Apply for positions--or make yourself available for appointments--even if you fail to meet every qualification. Reframe gaps in knowledge, skill, and experience by reaffirming your track record for overcoming challenges.

•Reach out to others—colleagues, educators, experts, influencers, and role models. Ask them to share their advice on how to achieve and professional success and move into leadership.

•Reach out beyond the four walls of the healthcare organization with an "elevator speech" that explains how and where you work and what you hope for in the future. Among the questions to ask yourself:

o How should I describe my role and responsibilities?

o What makes me passionate about medicine and healthcare?

o What is my ultimate career goal?

- o How and where do I want to have an impact?
- o What is my ideal role or position?
- o How can I leverage my strengths in clinical care, research, education, and leadership to make an impact?

*Identify, analyze, and mitigate barriers to women physician leadership.*

•Barriers includes sexism, gender bias and stereotyping, lack of access to established networks, undeveloped women's networks, and family responsibilities.

*Engage in conversations about career advancement by posing these questions:*

- What are my short- and long-term career objectives?
- What are my strengths in terms of knowledge, skills, experience, and leadership style, and where can I develop and improve?
- What am I willing to do—and not do—to fulfill my career objectives?

*Review your professional accomplishments and career goals as a prelude to developing career advancement strategies.*

- Deepen relationships with physician leaders to gain clarity on future career options and decisions.
- Solicit regular feedback and insight on how you can achieve your medical career objectives.
- Select education and training experiences that will build a well-rounded CV.
- Focus on new and emerging technologies, finance, and operations.

"Women physicians can support each other by sharing candid, thoughtful feedback," says Liz Bickley, COO Korn Ferry Health. "Doing so helps women physicians learn, rethink, and even change the way they approach organizational issues and problems."

*Develop or strengthen support programs for women physicians.*

- Engage mentors who can share career strategies and tactics and offer confidence-building encouragement.
- Tap into sponsors' connections to help you and other

women physicians secure high-stakes assignments, appointments, and positions.

- Give yourself and women physician colleagues the visibility and exposure needed to move into higher or senior-level positions.

## GENDER EQUITY

*Join Forces with Other Women Physicians to Promote Gender Equity.*

- Collaborate with human resources professionals to develop women-friendly services and benefits, including universal paid family leave, subsidized childcare, and family leave policies that avoid financial penalties.
- Focus on gender equity in recruitment by ensuring inclusive job descriptions, a gender-diverse talent pipeline, and an interview and hiring process free of gender bias and stereotyping.
- Advocate for fair, equitable, and transparent compensation policies. Offer competitive compensation to attract and retain top women physicians.
- Champion the promotion of women physicians with evaluation and promotion procedures that allow women physicians to move up the leadership ladder.
- Promote flexible work policies that combat burnout, stress, and exhaustion among women physicians.
- Seek comprehensive benefits and opportunities for better work-life balance.
- Promote better access to childcare and flexible work arrangements like remote and hybrid work and flexible scheduling.

Advocate for gender equity training in the context of diversity, equity, and inclusion training.

- Help create gender equity programs customized to the needs of organizations across the continuum of health and medical care.
- Make the business and clinical case for moving from awareness of gender equity challenges to engagement and action on a shared gender equity agenda.
- Build gender equity training programs that incorporate success stories, lessons learned, and opportunities for ongoing learning.

*Hold organizations, executives, and physician leaders accountable on gender equity goals.*

- Make gender equity an integral component of business and clinical strategy.
- Measure and track performance on gender equity goals.

- Advocate tying compensation to gender equity benchmarks.

*Help create cultures where physicians of all genders experience a sense of belonging and acceptance.*

- Increase inclusion to enhance the experience and engagement of women physicians.
- Reveal opportunities where women physicians can work and collaborate with other colleagues.
- Make room for women physicians across the organization and empower and invite them to speak out and speak up.
- Take other women physicians with you as you move into leadership positions and progress in your medical career.

## SELF-CARE AND WELL-BEING

*Promote a self-care agenda—both for yourself and your colleagues.*

- Promote movement and physical activity. Consider biking to work, taking an easy hike, jumping on an exercise bike, or hosting fun runs and walks.
- Eat healthy. Champion a whole food, plant-based diet for yourself and medical colleagues. Campaign against sugar spiking, insulin-releasing foods like processed carbohydrates. Instead, aim for whole grains, high fiber and high anti-oxidant foods.
- Calm your mind and spirit. Invite colleagues to join you in meditation, yoga, or the relaxation response. Or participate in quiet, peaceful activities that allow you to breathe deeply and unwind.
- Invest in refreshing, rejuvenating sleep.
  - o Re-engineer schedules that encourage physicians to "burn the midnight oil" or be available 24/7.
  - o Analyze the heavy price of sleep deprivation—from irritability and impaired cognition to weakened response times, depression, and anxiety.

## MENTAL WELLNESS

*Promote well-being and mental wellness—both for yourself and your colleagues.*

- Understand the impact of mental and emotional distress on yourself and women physician colleagues.
- Make mental wellness training a requirement for managers, executives, and physician leaders.
- Train leaders and colleagues on how they can respond to signs of mental distress in another physician.
  - o Advocate for added mental wellness support as a cost saving measure to prevent untreated depression and substance abuse.

- o Use professional assessment tools to determine how physicians' stress levels might affect individual and group performance.

- Strengthen the mental health coverage within your health plan, avoiding "phantom" coverage and narrow networks of psychiatrists and psychologists.

- Communicate openly to reduce the stigma of mental distress while encouraging access to mental health resources.

- o Promote mental health benefits and resources to physicians on an ongoing basis.

- o Cover mental distress and wellness in feedback sessions and performance reviews.

- o Discuss mental wellness as an organizational priority that influences conversations about recruitment, hiring, retention, and promotions.

- o Offer workshops for physicians on mental wellness and resilience.

*Promote well-being and joy and fulfillment in medicine.*

- Build flexibility into the schedules of all physicians.
- Provide access to tools, resources, and apps supporting sleep, stress reduction, exercise, and healthy eating.
- Advocate for a workplace meditation room, mindfulness training, or classes in relaxation and yoga.
- Encourage women physician colleagues to use their allocated vacation time to restore and refresh.
- Develop a return-to-work process that allows women physicians who took a leave of absence to feel welcomed and supported by colleagues.
- Generate opportunities for women physicians to build connections via social events, support groups, and social media platforms.
- Make the practice of medicine rich and fulfilling, helping physicians tap into the values that led them to medicine as a career in the first place.

## CONCLUSION

Read more about the Korn Ferry-AMWA Report, *Women in Medicine: Setting the Agenda for Change*.

[bit.ly/amwakfreport](https://bit.ly/amwakfreport)

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## About AMWA

The American Medical Women's Association is a multi-specialty organization of women physicians committed to advancing women in medicine, advocating for equity, and ensuring excellence in health care.

## About Korn Ferry

Korn Ferry is a global organizational consulting firm. We work with our clients to design optimal organization structures, roles, and responsibilities. We help them hire the right people and advise them on how to reward and motivate their workforce while developing professionals as they navigate and advance their careers.

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