

Women in Medicine: Building Pathways to Medical Leadership



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.

In 2019, women became the majority of enrolled U.S. medical students, according to data from the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC). But despite their increased numbers, women medical students, residents, and practicing physicians continue to confront challenges ranging from professional acceptance and gender bias to harassment, work-life imbalance, and roadblocks to leadership. And despite encouraging overall numbers, some groups remain underrepresented among women in medicine.

The time for action is now. This article offers leaders in medical education and healthcare delivery strategies and tactics to enhance the lives and careers of women medical students, residents, practicing physicians, and emerging leaders. The following are recommendations and action steps.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION THROUGH STEM

Build a foundation for success in medicine by engaging girls and young women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) in K-12 education programs. Encourage girls and young women to pursue math and science while countering attitudes that confirm gender biases and stereotypes. Create active, collaborative learning opportunities in after-school, weekend, and summer programs. Promote medical careers early on by zeroing in on higher education, informed career choices, and physician role models.

Work to attract, recruit, and retain women in premedical programs. Build learning environments that support young women. Invest in mentorship, sponsorship, and networking programs that link premedical students with seasoned women physicians.

Increase diversity within the pipeline of women in medicine. Actively build programs that reach students from

historically underrepresented communities. Develop initiatives to enhance academic success, promote leadership development, and provide counseling for medical school admissions.

MEDICAL STUDENTS AND RESIDENTS

Coach women medical students and residents on specialty selection and career options. Focus on pathways and roadmaps to medical practice and leadership, including career advancement through professional development and leadership training.

Address gender bias in medical school and residency programs. Educate medical school and residency leaders on both conscious and unconscious bias during medical school and residency program interviews. Encourage faculty and students to examine these biases and think beyond gender stereotypes.

Support women medical students and residents with flexible options. Offer women medical students and residents flexible options to accommodate fertility, pregnancy, and parenting. Encourage candid discussions of scheduling needs while offering cross-functional support groups for women who seek added flexibility.

Establish mentorship and sponsorship programs. Offer medical students and residents access to mentorship and sponsorship relationships and time needed to participate in these programs.

MEDICAL PRACTICE

Support women physicians as they launch and pursue careers in medicine by developing programs and services that promote career satisfaction, work-life balance, and clinical excellence.

"Women medical students and residents need mentors and sponsors who provide career direction," says Liz Bickley, COO, Korn Ferry Health. "And they need help in closing the long-standing gaps in compensation, grants, awards, and appointments."

Develop flexible work policies and practices. Evaluate the advantages of flexible schedules where women physicians can shift commute times, adopt compressed work week schedules, or stagger work hours. Clarify roles and responsibilities, evaluate the impact of flexible work policies on patient outcomes, clinical performance, and physician well-being.

Develop women physician resource groups. Use these groups to surface the needs of women physicians, remove roadblocks to women's professional advancement, and promote a culture free of gender bias.

Build mentoring programs for women physicians. Tap these programs to build awareness and understanding of other women physicians and guide professional development. Pair women physicians with colleagues who are willing to build relationships, explore personal and professional goals, and develop career strategies.

Develop sponsorship programs. Connect women physicians with sponsors who can facilitate introductions and referrals to medical influencers within committees, task forces, societies, associations, and universities.

Mobilize male physicians to serve as allies to women colleagues. Promote gender inclusiveness as a strategy to drive clinical and business performance, collaboration, innovation, and transformation of medicine and healthcare.

Support parenting. Offer paid leave following the birth or adoption of a child while providing benefits that address fertility, adoption, and foster care. Ensure the availability for private spaces for breastfeeding.

Ease access to medical and behavioral health resources. Reframe credentialing questions so that they don't discourage women physicians from seeking care. Provide timely access to mental health care, including insurance coverage for that care.

WOMEN PHYSICIANS IN LEADERSHIP

Share knowledge, skills, and experiences needed for medical leadership. Ensure that women physicians can access

these leadership experiences and resources via training, coaching, and mentoring.

Encourage women physicians to make decisive career and personal choices. Promote conversations on medical career and practice choices, leadership development, and integration of personal responsibilities with workplace roles. Also, share how the organization's mission, vision, and values call for the rejection of gender biases and stereotypes.

Evaluate systems and assumptions about women physicians. Look for ways to reduce conscious and unconscious gender bias while promoting gender equity and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies. Coach medical colleagues to avoid assumptions about what women physicians want from life and work. Create a culture where women physicians feel free to engage in candid conversations about medical practice and family.

Offer women physicians flexible leadership development experiences by offering flexible formats and virtual options for learning.

Create leadership-building networks. Help women physicians build relationships that accelerate access to information, promotions, and leadership opportunities. Mobilize women physician champions to serve as mentors, sponsors, and coaches to other women.

Ensure career and pay equity. Implement transparent policies that create equitable opportunities for career advancement and equitable compensation scales, irrespective of gender.

"Women in medical practice face ongoing challenges of gender discrimination, work-life imbalance, and barriers to leadership," says Eliza Lo Chin, MD, MPH, Executive Director, AMWA. "Medicine must find innovative ways to support women physicians at each stage of their medical careers."

CONCLUSION

Women in medicine still face disparities in career advancement. Leaders can shape the future of women in medicine by driving innovations in STEM, medical education, and medical practice and opening the doors to advancement and leadership success.

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

bit.ly/amwakfreport

RESOURCES

<http://www.ed.gov/STEM>

<https://www.nsf.gov/ehr/Materials/STEM%20Education%20of%20the%20Future%20-%202020%20Visioning%20Report.pdf>

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/2021-CoSTEM-Progress-Report-OSTP.pdf>

<https://www.aamc.org/news-insights/ending-gender-harassment-medicine>

<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/jwh.2016.6044>

<https://nam.edu/gender-based-differences-in-burnout-issues-faced-by-women-physicians/>

<https://www.ama-assn.org/member-groups-sections/women-physicians>

https://www.amwa-doc.org/?https%3A%2F%2Fwww_amwa-doc_org%2Fabout-amwa%2Fmember-benefits-amwa%2F

<https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/health-equity/3-ways-achieve-gender-equity-academic-medicine-promotions>

<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/jwh.2019.7992>

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2789168>

<https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMsa1916935>

<https://hbr.org/2022/01/why-so-many-women-physicians-are-quitting>

<https://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/97151>

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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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