

Research to address senior women physicians' challenges

SEP 13, 2017

Sara Berg, MS

Senior News Writer

The many female physicians who entered medicine in the 1970s and '80s are at or nearing retirement age, yet remarkably little research has been done to highlight the issues facing them while studies largely focus on the hurdles confronted by younger women physicians. Kimberly Templeton, MD, says that while such research is important, she wants to help to help bring some focus to older physicians.

"I've gone to a lot of events and listened to a lot of webinars about more senior physicians," said Dr. Templeton, professor of orthopedic surgery at the University of Kansas School of Medicine and Health System, and the immediate past president of the American Medical Women's Association.

"All of the speakers were male and all of the issues that were discussed were those that impacted male physicians," she said. "Granted, for this more senior age group, there are now more men than women, but this will be changing, with more women entering medicine over the past few decades. It was a little frustrating because the assumption was that the issues for women were the same as for men."

"Maybe they are, but until you look, you don't know," she added. "Without knowing what the questions or issues are, it is hard to address them."

Dr. Templeton, along with Anne Walling, MD, professor emerita at the University of Kansas in Wichita, is embarking on further research to help gain a better understanding of the concerns and challenges facing female senior physicians. She is doing it with the help of a grant from the Joan F. Giambalvo Fund for the Advancement of Women.

A second physician, Basmah Safdar, MD, was also awarded a Giambalvo Fund grant for her research on the stereotyping of physicians by gender and race with regard to patient satisfaction. Dr. Safdar's work will be explored in a separate article.

The AMA Women Physicians Section (AMA-WPS) hosts Women in Medicine Month each September

to acknowledge pioneering women, celebrate their accomplishments and help cultivate future women physicians. The Joan F. Giambalvo Fund for the Advancement of Women Award is administered by the AMA Foundation on behalf of the AMA-WPS. The AMA-WPS and the AMA Foundation awards scholarships of up to \$10,000 to health care researchers to identify and address issues that affect women physicians and medical students. The AMA-WPS and AMA Foundation have granted 23 research awards since 2006 on topics such as flexible work options and the promotion and retention of diversity in medical education.

Senior women physicians have few, if any, role models and little information to help them navigate this important stage of their professional lives, Dr. Templeton said. A small study of 21 senior women physicians published in 1990 found that two-thirds continued working after 65. Of those who retired, many reported personal illness or a desire to pursue other interests as their reasons. This study did not address other issues that these women faced.

The author of that 27-year-old study noted that there was little information available about women physicians in their senior years, which is a reason for Dr. Templeton's interest in conducting further research.

"With women making up half the medical school class and a significant proportion of those in practice, there's an upcoming tsunami of more senior female physicians, but we don't know what the issues are that they face and what we can do to address them," she told *AMA Wire*®.

"Are there things we can do to help or intervene and maybe make that period of a career less stressful to decrease burnout, improve career satisfaction and to keep women in the workforce? Are there ways we can alleviate fears they may have?" Dr. Templeton said.

Double-duty caregiving

Just as younger female physicians shoulder the lion's share of the burden during the child-rearing years, senior women physicians often end up as de facto caregivers for their own elderly parents, ill spouses or significant others, or other family members, Dr. Templeton said.

"To a great degree, society assumes that if you are a young female professional physician and you have kids that you're going to be the one most likely to do a lot of the caretaking," she said. "What I think we're lacking in society is, understanding that if you're on the other end of the age spectrum you're still going to be the one doing the caretaking."

“And there’s not a lot of provision for that. What do we do on the other end of the career when you leave to take care of your parents? It’s almost like reverse parental leave,” she added.

Dr. Templeton collaborated with Dr. Walling to host focus groups on both campuses. These groups were used for one discussion on issues among senior women physicians.

“One of the most impactful to me was from a woman in her sixties,” said Dr. Templeton. “She said this was the first time in her life that she ever felt vulnerable. She just felt uncertain or unsure.”

“She had always known what she wanted to do in her life, but now at this point when she is getting older and facing some of her own health issues, she was feeling insecure because she didn’t know what she was supposed to do in terms of her career,” Dr. Templeton said added.

Some of the issues brought to the attention of Drs. Templeton and Walling have been finance-related. While this is seen among male physicians, the concerns were different. This might be the case because many female physicians may have left retirement and financial planning to their spouses, Dr. Templeton speculated.

“Their spouses may be ill, deceased or they’re divorced and now and those women physicians are solely in charge of their own finances. They really weren’t sure how to manage in terms of retirement or even how to sign up for Medicare,” she said.

“If we can identify the issues, maybe even find women who have been down this road and how they made this work, we can develop materials and programming to facilitate this stage of women physicians' careers,” said Dr. Templeton.

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