

Pay inequity, flex schedules top concerns for women physicians

SEP 27, 2017

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Nearly two-thirds of women physicians said in a new survey that they feel disadvantaged when it comes to negotiating contracts, while almost half said they were evaluated using different criteria than men were during the hiring process and 44 percent agreed that pay levels are gender-neutral at their workplace. These and other hot-button issues such as gender stereotyping and work-life balance were explored in the survey of 500 practicing female physicians.

The 15-minute online survey of female physicians 64 and younger was conducted by the AMA to gain a better understanding of what is important to women physicians and to make an impact in the areas that would be the most beneficial to female physicians. The women surveyed were representative of the U.S. mix of specialties and practice sizes.

Results from the survey close out Women in Medicine Month, which is led by the AMA Women Physicians Section to honor physicians who have offered their time, wisdom and support to advance women in medicine. Women in Medicine Month serves as a platform to showcase the accomplishments of female physicians and highlights advocacy needs related to professional concerns of women physicians and health issues affecting women patients.

Medical dream often starts early

For 56 percent of the women surveyed, the thought of becoming a physician began at the age of 10 or younger. And 59 percent said that a role model inspired them to become a physician. Among those who were inspired by someone else, 33 percent attributed their desire to go into medicine to their personal physician and 29 percent were inspired by a physician parent.

The lifelong ambition to practice medicine often comes with challenges, the survey found. Sixty-four percent of the women surveyed said they experienced a disadvantage when it came to contract

negotiations, while 47 percent saw it in their hiring evaluations. And 33 percent felt this bias in relation to their pay levels.

Many also agreed, however, that leadership opportunities are encouraged and available to women in the workforce. Yet 55 percent said that when up for promotion they were evaluated using different criteria than their male physician counterparts.

A 2016 *JAMA Internal Medicine* commentary by Vineet Arora, MD, a board-certified internist and academic hospitalist, found that even though “the profession of medicine achieved gender equity with equal representation in medical schools’ admissions,” women physicians experienced “one of the largest pay gaps between sexes among professionals.”

Dr. Arora noted a study finding that newly trained male physicians in New York in 2008 made \$16,819 more than newly trained female physicians. Ten years prior the pay gap was only \$3,600, reported the commentary.

Seeking balance

Pay inequity is not the only challenge facing women physicians, with almost eight in 10 of those surveyed agreeing that it is a struggle to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Meanwhile, 73 percent believed “responsibilities related to caring for aging parents tend to fall on women physicians more than male physicians.” And 92 percent agreed that “childcare responsibilities tend to fall on women physicians more than male physicians.”

JAMA Internal Medicine recently published a study that looked at dual-physician couples without children and found that men worked 57 hours while women worked 52.4 hours. However, the disparities in hours worked grew when children entered the picture with female physicians working 10.9 hours less (41.5 hours) than women without children. Men with children worked 55.3 hours, which was 1.7 hours less than men without children.

In the AMA survey, 41 percent of female physicians said their workplace did not provide adequate support for managing family responsibility. Seven in 10 women physicians also said adequate childcare opportunities were lacking in their workplace.

The study’s results show that women physicians want more options to help them address the struggles they face when trying to balance their work and family responsibilities. Ninety-seven percent said they want the option to have a flexible work schedule.

Women physicians often relied on their colleagues or friends as sources of support when facing

issues that were specific to female doctors. However, about four in 10 women said they rely on internet sources of support such as Facebook’s wildly popular Physician Moms Group.

Despite the myriad challenges faced by women physicians, 86 percent said they were “somewhat or very likely to continue practicing as a physician for the remainder of their working career.”

Experts participating in an upcoming panel discussion in the AMA International Medical Graduates Community, “Women Leaders: How to make an impact and promote women leadership despite obstacles,” will cover some of these topics in greater depth. The discussion runs Oct. 19–26 and will feature successful women leaders interested in making a difference and supporting other women. Physicians can ask questions on how to make an impact and how stand out as a leader. Visit the discussion page.

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