

# 5 things organizations can do to advance women in medicine

SEP 15, 2020

**Sara Berg, MS**

Senior News Writer

---

Women in medicine have made tremendous progress. However, women continue to encounter persistent obstacles to advancement, especially in senior positions where they remain underrepresented, according to a recent report. While there are signs of progress and reasons for optimism, more work needs to be done to elevate women in medicine, especially as the world grapples with COVID-19 and implications associated with it.

Every September, the AMA celebrates women physicians, residents and medical students during Women in Medicine Month. In 2020, the pandemic has posed another set of challenges for women physicians to surmount. This September, the AMA is thanking and recognizing women physicians tirelessly advancing equity and creating change.

Health care continues to outperform other industries in female representation at all levels. However, women in medicine decrease in representation across the pipeline, accounting for 66% of all entry-level and only 30% of C-suite positions, according to the McKinsey & Co. report, “Women in healthcare: Moving from the front lines to the top rung.”

Despite obstacles to advancement, nearly 75% of women in medicine report satisfaction with their careers compared with about 69% of men. As women rise through the ranks, career satisfaction increases from 71% at entry levels to 91% at the senior vice president level.

As the pandemic and large-scale protests focused on racial injustice in the U.S. continue to amplify the need to address inequity, here are five actions from the report that organizations can take to fix representation of women at the manager and senior manager levels.

## Set goal for more women in senior management

The biggest obstacle to women's progression in medicine develops in the transition from manager to senior manager with female representation falling by 10 percentage points overall. These discrepancies in promotion rates create significant barriers to representation of women in more senior roles, which cannot be adjusted with external hiring alone.

Instead, health systems and organizations should set a goal for getting more females and women of color into senior management. Companies should also set goals for hiring and promotions. One way to increase female representation at executive levels is by focusing on ensuring women are represented across entry-level roles, particularly where senior leadership often advance from.

AMA policy on advancing gender equity in medicine advocates for equal pay and career advancement.

## **Require diverse slates for hiring, promotions**

Challenges are magnified for women of color. White women in entry-level positions starts at 46%, gradually declining to 25% in the C-suite. Women of color account for 20% of entry-level positions and only 5% in the C-suite.

A lack of representation among women of color can have a far-reaching impact in medicine. With fewer executives who are women of color, it can translate into fewer role models for women beginning their careers. Organizations should require a diverse panel of candidates for hiring and promotions at senior levels. A more diverse selection of candidates can be a powerful driver of change at every level.

Learn from AMA President Susan R. Bailey, MD, about how we can't allow the pandemic to set back women physicians' advancement.

## **Invest in training**

Eighty percent of men and 90% of women reported that diversity is a priority at their organization. However, only 10% of women and 16% of men said it was a top priority.

Unconscious bias often plays a pivotal role in determining who is hired, promoted or left behind. For individuals who participate in entry-level performance reviews, organizations are less likely to offer unconscious bias training. However, mitigating bias in this early stage is vital to preventing further discrimination up the ladder. Investing in training can help create allies for women in the early stages of their careers.

Learn more from the AMA about three ways women physicians can become leaders in medicine.

## **Establish clear evaluation criteria**

To keep bias from affecting hiring decisions and reviews, organizations must ensure the right processes are in place for evaluations. This requires well-defined evaluation criteria in advance of the review process. Evaluation tools must be intuitive and developed to aggregate objective, measurable input, said the report.

It is also important to promote transparency while communicating the fairness and objectivity of the review process. This ensures the progress women in medicine make is merit-based by the entire workforce.

AMA policy affirms that transparency in pay scale and promotion criteria is necessary to promote gender equity.

## **Put more women in line to step up**

Women represent about 80% of entry-level front-line positions, which are often predominantly female. However, moving up the ladder, women only account for about 30% of C-suite roles. This needs to change. Training, sponsorship and high-profile assignments can help elevate women in different roles.

While most companies have these building blocks, they need to double down and improve their efforts to provide women with access and opportunities. It must be done across all roles to evenly distribute diverse talent with equal opportunity for advancement.

Read about how challenges faced by women physicians don't disappear with age.

The AMA Women Physicians Section works to increase the number and influence of female physicians in leadership roles. The section also advocates for and advances the understanding of women's health issues.