

5 ways to cut long-term impact of COVID-19 on women physicians

SEP 21, 2020

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Women account for almost 80% of the health care workforce, more than one-third of active physicians, nearly half of all doctors in training and more than half of all medical students in the U.S. Yet gender inequities remain rampant. In times of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the challenges and burdens faced by women are exacerbated. More needs to be done to prevent a setback for women physicians.

“At the beginning of the pandemic, when everybody was working from home, I naively thought, ‘Oh, this is great. Now everybody will understand how important it is to have work-life balance and how you can spend time with your family and get your work done,’” said AMA President Susan R. Bailey, MD. “I was hoping that that might end up evening out some of the imbalance, but that does not seem to have happened.”



Susan R. Bailey, MD

During a recent interview, Dr. Bailey shared some ways to maintain and accelerate the progress of women in medicine.

Gain an appreciation for flexibility

Dr. Bailey hopes that with things being shut down and people working from home, it “has at least given some leaders of health care systems a greater appreciation for how hard it really is to try to practice medicine and raise a family at the same time.”

Additionally, she hopes there will be a “greater appreciation for the role that telemedicine can play in making all of our schedules more flexible and enabling us to see patients in perhaps different, not as strict timeframes,” Dr. Bailey said. “There are some things that really have to be done in person, but there's some things that we can do virtually and do just as well.”

Read this *JAMA* Viewpoint essay, “Women Physicians and the COVID-19 Pandemic.”

Understand the value of time with family

“It can be the starting point for a conversation if a woman has taken some time out of her career path to spend with her family,” said Dr. Bailey. “There should be a greater awareness now of how important that is, how valuable it is.”

When women physicians take time to spend with their families, it should “be seen as a positive rather than a negative,” she said.

In an episode of the “AMA COVID-19 Update,” experts address challenges women physicians face during the pandemic.

Be intentional about continuing the conversation

Whether women physicians are in academic medicine, health systems or in private practice, “there really needs to be some very active support, mentorship and awareness raising of how gender equity is still a very significant issue,” said Dr. Bailey.

The conversation should also include how the pandemic has harmed gender equity and how the field of medicine can narrow the gender gap.

“When this is all behind us, it’s human nature for everyone just to think, ‘OK, glad that’s over. Business as usual. Let’s go back to doing what we’re doing,’ without realizing what’s been lost,” said Dr. Bailey. “Medical leaders at all levels need to make sure that their women physicians haven’t been lost in the shuffle.”

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.

Reach out about research

While there are women who are doing research during the pandemic “they just haven’t been able to get articles written and submitted,” said Dr. Bailey. “It’s in the academic medical centers’ best interest to have as many of their faculty actively engaged as possible.”

“Again, it’s just raising the awareness that this is a unique time,” she said, adding that academic medical center leadership should “make sure they reach out to all of their physicians, but especially the women, saying, ‘How can we help? Is there somebody that we can help with data, organization, reference or whatever the hurdle is to get an article submitted?’”

Read this *JAMA Surgery* editorial, “Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Manuscript Submissions by Women.”

Change the culture of medicine

“The first step is recognizing that all of our work has value and that we don't all have to fit into a prescribed notion of being good enough or being defined by how many hours you're physically in the hospital or in your office,” said Dr. Bailey. It's about having “greater value for part time work and for shared jobs.”

“For so long, women who have worked part time or shared schedules have really been made to feel like they're less than dedicated to their professions and nothing could be further from the truth,” she said. “I'm hoping that what we've been through in the past six months will show us that it's OK for work schedules to not all be the same.”

Learn more from Dr. Bailey about how we can't allow the pandemic to set back women physicians' advancement.