

# Women physicians underrepresented in cable news COVID-19 coverage

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Women represent more than 40% of academic faculty positions in U.S. training institutions. Still, recent data—from a JAMA Internal Medicine research letter tracking the frequency with which women physicians appear on cable news networks as expert interviewees—portends a gender gap in media representation during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“This inconsistency with the composition of the workforce could detract from the perceived legitimacy of female doctors amid a national crisis,” the study’s authors wrote. “Greater diversity of voices might enrich discourse.”

## Who’s speaking where?

On the whole, the study found that of the 220 unique guests speaking on COVID-19 content across the three major cable news networks—Fox News, MSNBC and CNN—30% were women. That sample included five weeks of study in the prime-time slot, defined as 8 to 11 p.m. ET/PT. Of physicians in the sample, 12 of 47 were women. Accounting for physicians who did multiple interviews, the data found that women were interviewed 17 times out of a possible 117 physician appearances.

The data, measured from mid-May to mid-June, also found that the frequency with which female physicians appeared varied by network. On MSNBC, women physicians represented 30% of interviews on COVID-19 in the sample. CNN was in the middle of the sample with 22% of its physician interviews featuring women physicians. Conversely, the research letter points out that “Fox had 0% female physician representation throughout our 5-week observation window but did interview a female nurse.”

While the data is indicative of a gender gap among women offering medical expert insight on the pandemic, it seems to mirror a gender gap in media representation on a broader scale.

In the non-physician groups, among PhD-holders, six of 31 speakers were women. Other fields represented in the study of experts who contributed to COVID-19 content included interviewees working in economics (one woman among seven speakers) and public health (three women among seven speakers).

“The proportion of women speaking on COVID-19 content was no different from the proportion of women speaking on other content, suggesting that the paucity of female voices on cable news programs is not subject specific,” according to the research letter.

## **Aiding women health care workers during the pandemic**

In the United States, women constitute almost 80% of the health care workforce and represent more than one-third of the active physicians, nearly half of all physicians-in-training and more than half of all medical school matriculants. Women often face distinct challenges and burdens that can be exacerbated in times of crisis.

The AMA has curated a selection of resources to assist women in medicine and those who care for women patients during the COVID-19 outbreak to help manage work-life integration, personal well-being, special issues impacting female patients and other critical information. The AMA continues to monitor emerging trends and advocate for physicians, residents and students.