

This project creates “sisterhood of support” for women physicians

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The number of female physicians continues to grow, with women representing half of medical students. Yet women physicians still face persistent challenges, including pay inequities, discrimination, lack of opportunities for advancement and work-life imbalance. All of these can contribute to physician burnout.

More learning is needed on how to effectively provide support for female physicians. That is where the Women’s Wellness through Equity and Leadership (WEL) project is helping.

Initially formed in 2018 by six major organizations in health care, the WEL project focused on bringing together early-to mid-career women physicians for networking, mentorship and leadership training. Now the WEL project consists of 10 leading U.S. physician organizations and other health care stakeholders.

They are: the American Academy of Family Physicians, American Academy of Pediatrics, American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, American College of Physicians, American Hospital Association, AMA, American Medical Women’s Association, American Psychiatric Association, National Hispanic Medical Association and National Medical Association.

The project is funded by a grant from the Physicians Foundation to foster the development of the next wave of women physician leaders to build a healthier, more equitable work experience.

During the first phase of the WEL project, 18 early- to mid-career women physicians—three from each initial organization—were chosen to participate. For the second phase, 50 women physicians were selected—five from each organization. Each physician is provided with networking, mentorship and education on leadership, equity and wellness.

“We made sure that the scholars selected represented diversity from all of our organizations. So, diversity in the context of race and ethnicity, but also diversity of experience and practice,” said Fan Tait, MD, a pediatric neurologist and chief medical officer of the American Academy of Pediatrics. “Other examples of diversity included urban versus rural, academic and private practice and geographic diversity across our country.”

Focus on well-being, equity, leadership

The WEL project consists of a curriculum that looks at the intersectionality of well-being, equity and leadership for women physicians. In the 18-month period, scholars of the project are asked to attend three two-day meetings and monthly webinars. These all take place virtually as the COVID-19 pandemic continues.

“We are cognizant of the commitments and responsibilities of the Scholars and we're very cognizant of the pandemic with the resultant additional stressors professionally and personally,” said Dr. Tait. “We believe that wellness is even more important now, so we're especially pleased that we can offer the curriculum to them.

“What we're specifically asking them to do is to attend the three two-day meetings and monthly webinars based on a curriculum addressing wellness, equity and leadership,” she added, noting that “these scholars are already accomplished and knowledgeable, but we're really working to make sure the activities can help them every day in their practices and their lives.”

Their indelible mark guides the way

During the first two-day meeting, “the scholars developed their individual ‘indelible marks’ with guidance from consultants from Lumeri,” which is a woman-owned business consulting firm that helps companies turn the tide on gender diversity and leadership, said Dr. Tait. “In defining their indelible mark, each scholar is asked to clearly define what she is going to accomplish in this world.”

“They work on—and refine—their indelible mark with input from the other scholars and the leadership of Lumeri,” she explained. “Their indelible mark is designed to provide direction not only during the program but throughout their career and lifetime.”

The scholars are also asked to identify “mileposts” of goals and accomplishments with quarterly presentations and feedback from the other scholars.

“Throughout the year, each of them reports out to the other scholars in groups of 10 where they talk about any problems or obstacles they are facing, as well as their accomplishments,” said Dr. Tait. “It becomes a sisterhood of support. It’s remarkable.”

Every September, the AMA celebrates women physicians, residents and medical students during Women in Medicine Month. The pandemic posed another set of challenges for women physicians to surmount. That is why the AMA thanks the women physicians who are tirelessly advancing equity and building on change. This September, the AMA is recognizing the endurance and strength demonstrated by women in medicine through the challenges of the past year while being an advocate and ally.