Women doctors who succeed at midcareer: What they’ve learned

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Brendan Murphy
Senior News Writer

Nearly four in 10 physicians are women and their prevalence in medicine continues to grow; 46% of resident physicians are women and nearly 54% of medical students are women.
Family physician Geneen T. Gin, DO, presented her findings on what helps women physicians make the midcareer transition. Still, women are less represented in leadership positions. In academic medicine, for instance, women only account for 21% of full professors and 16% of dean positions. A recent presentation, during the 2022 AMA Annual Meeting, looked at the challenges women in medicine encounter as they attempt to climb the ladder in moving from the early to middle stages of their career.

“There are often competing work and nonwork demands, such as caring for children or aging parents, that coincide temporally with this transition from early to midcareer,” said Geneen T. Gin, DO, who presented on the topic at an AMA Women Physicians Section education session.

“And women who are faced with these demands are making choices which may alter their career trajectory such as deciding to leave a position in industry and academia. Women are beginning to realize the influence of work-life balance, the opportunity for mentorship and institutional culture on career satisfaction.”

How women adapt

Dr. Gin, a family physician with University of California, San Diego Health, is among a group of physicians working to study the early to midcareer transition of women physicians. She is a co-investigator on the project with Tiffany Leung, MD; Tammy Lin, MD; Karen Wang, MD; Sima Pendharkar, MD; and Angie Chen, MD.

In presenting findings from the research, she outlined some of the key attributes of women who successfully navigate the transition, including:

- Integrating work/non-work obligations.
- Mentorship of younger physicians and physician peers.
- Finding mentors, sponsors, and coaches to help career advancement.
- Becoming a leader or advocate on a local, national or international level.
- Recognizing self-care needs when facing burnout or other physical or mental health issues.

Study participants were recruited through postings social media, professional networks, listservs, discussion forums. A small group of them conducted 50–100 minute interviews about their career transition via Zoom.

“Initially, the primary goal was to develop best practices for career transition,” Dr. Gin said. “Once underway, the data collected was very rich and we wanted to take time to analyze and understand the data. The project evolved into focusing on understanding the journey from early to midcareer and...
using this as a future foundation to derive best practices."

At the Annual Meeting, the House of Delegates directed the AMA to:

- Advocate for research on physician-specific data analyzing changes in work patterns and employment outcomes among female physicians during the pandemic including, but not limited to, understanding potential gaps in equity, indications for terminations and/or furloughs, gender differences in those who had unpaid additional work hours, and issues related to intersectionality.
- Collaborate with relevant organizations to evaluate obstacles affecting female physicians and medical students during the pandemic.

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A wealth of knowledge

The research from Dr. Gin and her colleagues found four recurrent themes: competing demands, boundary control, need for resources, and a shift from self-confidence to self-activation

All participants, Dr. Gin said, described tension felt between work and non-work responsibilities with finite time. There also was a need for additional resources. In the nonwork environment, women sought help to manage competing demands and boundary control. Those resources aimed to help them redistribute home responsibilities, hoping to free them up to devote time to personal responsibilities. This included outsourcing services such as grocery delivery and hiring child-care professionals and housekeepers.

On the professional side, women physicians sought resources to help achieve career advancement.

Dr. Gin quoted an interviewee who said she had no idea she should apply for a promotion until a colleague urged her. To help direct this phase of development women physicians turned to mentorship, leadership training, books and even social media, where one research subject said she found a valuable network of women in her specialty.

Once resources were marshalled, Dr. Gin spoke of “a shift from self-confidence to self-activation.” One participant in the research described a growing awareness of her expertise that led to her pursue an external activity that forwarded her career trajectory.