

Men with mustaches outnumber women in med school leadership



Women are so under-represented as clinical department heads in U.S. medical schools, they're outnumbered by men with mustaches, according to a recent study. (Ghislain & Marie David de Lossy / Cultura)

By Leslie Mann
Chicago Tribune

You may not be surprised to hear that men are more likely than women to head clinical departments at U.S. medical schools.

But this next fact might raise a few eyebrows: The men in these power positions outnumber the women even when you only count men with mustaches.

That's the finding of a recent study that examined gender-related disparities in academic medical leadership. Researchers found that women made up 13 percent of clinical department heads at the country's top 50 medical schools funded by the National Institutes of Health, while mustachioed men accounted for 19 percent.

Why did the researchers zero in on mustaches?

"It's memorable," said Dr. Mackenzie Wehner, lead author of "Plenty of Moustaches but not Enough Women: Cross Sectional Study of Medical Leaders," published late last year in the medical journal BMJ.

Mustaches are also relatively rare. Study authors cited a report estimating that less than 15 percent of men sport hair between the nose and upper lip. That made them a good barometer of how unusual it is to find women in the upper ranks of academic medicine.

Although the gender ratio is split just about 50/50 in medical schools, "it decreases with each upward rank," said Wehner, a dermatology resident physician at Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania.

Academic medical institutions (teaching hospitals) share a consistent hierarchy. On the clinical side, you progress from med student to intern, resident, fellow, attending physician, department head and medical director.

Wehner looked at the country's top 50 NIH-funded medical schools and combed their websites for head shots of doctors at the top of the ladder in clinical specialty departments, such as anesthesia, emergency medicine and neurology, to name a few. Of these 1,018 leaders, 190 were mustachioed men and 137 were women. (The researchers acknowledged that one of the limitations of the study is that some of the photos might be out-of-date.)

Wehner was "distressed but not surprised" to see when women quit or postponed their ascents; it coincided with when they had families.

"Women still do more than their share of housework and child care, so it's hard for them to go 'all in' at work," said Jessica Milli, study director at the Institute for Women's Policy Research. "They need flexible schedules to juggle family and work."

It's no wonder the study tallied a greater percentage of high-ranking women in specialties where they're more in control of their schedules, such as obstetrics/gynecology, pediatrics, family medicine and dermatology.

"I set my own hours," said Dr. Judith Hellman, dermatologist and associate clinical professor of dermatology at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York. "So I was there for my son when he was young and am now that's he's 18 and taking a gap year."

Dr. Lisa Moreno-Walton was a surgeon until the day an emergency operation forced her to miss her daughter's birthday party.

"I went back to do a residency in emergency medicine, where I make my schedule," said Moreno-Walton, emergency physician and professor of emergency medicine at Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center in New Orleans. "When I'm off work, I'm off. There's no guilt."

Wehner's findings jibe with the Medscape Women as Physician Leaders Report, which says the percentage of women falls to 20 percent at the dean level. Ditto for the 2014 State of Women in Academic Medicine study from the Association of American Medical Colleges, which found that only 16 percent of deans are female.

Medical academia's 13 percent is low compared with many other professions — but not all, according to studies by Catalyst and the Center for American Progress. Nearly 21 percent of real estate executives are women. In transportation, finance and insurance, it's 28 percent. But when it comes to information technology, the number drops to 9 percent. Filmmaking? Sixteen percent. Women are 10 percent of governors, 12 percent of big-city mayors and 20 percent of U.S. senators.

Teaching hospitals can help women by refusing to tolerate sexual harassment, said Milli.

"It's still there," she said. "Women know it."

Offering better maternity *and* paternity leave would help too.

"It's great that (Facebook CEO Mark) Zuckerberg announced his leave, but that's not the norm," Milli added.

In what's seen as a step in the right direction, universities increasingly allow women to stop their tenure clocks and work part time while their kids are young, said Moreno-Walton.

"It's no longer 'move up or get out,'" she said.

The bottom line, said Wehner, is hospitals should attain a "mustache index" greater than one, which means having more top-ranking women than top-ranking men with mustaches.

Hospitals can achieve this by hiring, retaining and promoting more women, or they can "ask the men to shave," she said, tongue-in-cheek.