

Barriers to female career progression in medicine

Authors: Stephanie Moore, Jenna Fielding and Claire MacDermott

Aims

To identify barriers to female career progression in medicine, such that practical solutions can be recommended – and subsequently implemented – to negate these barriers.

Methods

Doctors in the Supporting Women in Medicine (SWiM) network were invited to participate in homogenous focus groups (all participants were of a similar grade in each focus group), which were designed to identify barriers to female career progression in medicine. Focus groups comprised medical students, junior doctors, GPs and consultants.

Thematic analysis of each focus group transcript was carried out. Key barriers to female career progression were identified for each focus group. These themes were then compared and contrasted across the career spectrum.

Results

There were significant challenges for women in balancing personal and professional demands in medicine, regardless of career stage. This was compounded by a lack of flexible working opportunities presented by the organisational culture of the healthcare sector. Few women felt that they had received adequate support, careers advice or mentoring throughout the duration of their career. It was apparent that women frequently experience a lack of confidence in their abilities. Consultants were more aware of factors hindering their career progression than were medical students and more junior doctors.

Conclusions

Barriers to female career progression in medicine were identified. To overcome these, the authors recommend:

- Increased mentoring and positive role models.
- The need to address specialty-specific factors that enable employment to be more responsive and flexible to the trainees within the system.
- The provision of extra training opportunities, with the intention that trainees have more confidence in their abilities.

This work requires further elaboration to explore the impact on wider healthcare groups, and whether the same barriers are apparent across professional groups. In particular, it may be expanded by consideration given to educational research into how women respond to supervision and the ideal learning styles.

With local, regional and national implications, results from this analysis have the potential to break down barriers, and empower women to have the confidence to take on leadership roles. ■

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no competing interests.