



Original Research

Female Physicians Are Underrepresented in Recognition Awards from the American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation

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Abstract

Background: Medical specialty societies are important resources for physicians in advancing their careers. There is a gap in the literature regarding gender disparities within these societies. This study assesses one area where disparities may exist: recognition awards.

Objective: To determine whether female physicians are underrepresented among recognition award recipients by the American Academy of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation (AAPM&R).

Design: Surveillance study.

Setting and Methods: A published online list of national award recipients from the AAPM&R was analyzed. Forty-eight years of data were included, as the list contained all major recognition award recipients from 1968 to 2015. All awards that were given exclusively to physicians were included. There were eight award categories listed online; seven met this criterion, with a total of 264 individual awards presented. One award category was excluded because it focused on distinguished public service and included both physician and nonphysician (eg, public official) recipients. Awards that were not published online were also excluded.

Main Outcome Measures: Total awards given to female versus male physicians from 1968 to 2015, with awards given over the past decade (2006-2015) assessed independently. Lectureships were also analyzed as a set. For awards given to groups of physician recipients, analysis included gender composition of the group (eg, male only versus female only versus mixed-gender physician groups). To assess the proportion of female versus male physiatrists over time, physician gender and specialty data from 3 sources were used: the American Medical Association (AMA), the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), and the AAPM&R.

Results: Over the past 48 years, the AAPM&R presented 264 recognition awards to physicians. Award recipients were overwhelmingly male ($n = 222$; 84.1%). Females received 15.9% ($n = 42$) of the total awards, although there was an upward trend in female physician recipients to 26.8% ($n = 26$) from 2006 to 2015. Lectureships were given to 8 female physicians ($n = 8$ of 77, 10.4%). These results were lower than the proportion of female physicians in the field of physiatry (35% in 2013). Female physicians were more likely to receive awards if they were part of a group and less likely to be recognized if the award was given to only 1 recipient each year or involved a lectureship with a speaking opportunity at a national meeting.

Conclusions: To our knowledge, this is the first study in medicine to assess whether female physicians are underrepresented among recipients of recognition awards presented by a national medical society. For nearly half a century, female physicians have been underrepresented in awards presented by the AAPM&R. Although it is encouraging that the proportion of female physicians receiving awards is increasing, further research is needed to understand why underrepresentation remains.

Level of Evidence: To be determined.

Introduction

Awards are a major indication of professional achievement, and defined processes for recognizing

individuals for special accomplishments exist in essentially every sector of society, including government, media, military, sports, and medicine. From Pulitzer Prizes to Nobel Prizes, awards acknowledge accomplishment

and convey prestige. In medicine, and as evidenced by the unique section(s) dedicated to awards that are routinely part of the curriculum vitae templates distributed to faculty, awards are highly valued by medical school promotions' committees. In a report documenting the underrepresentation of women in professional science awards, Lincoln et al explained, "Awards and prizes are close cousins of peer-reviewed publications, as they provide important external markers of professional achievement and are instrumental for shaping and advancing careers, including promotion and tenure decisions" [1].

The science of *phaleristics*, the study of awards, is extensive [2], and it is important to consider the positive impact that recognition awards have on both individuals and institutions. When focusing on benefits conferred to individuals, it is important to note that professional physician organizations exist in large part to support their members' careers. Specifically, in the "Member Benefits" section of the AAPM&R website, the first statement reads, "Strengthening the specialty of PM&R and supporting members' practices and patients, AAPM&R offers a full depth and breadth of benefits designed to help PM&R physicians meet new challenges and build successful careers" [3].

There is a large body of literature demonstrating gender inequality in science and medicine. Female physician researchers earn less than male counterparts, even after adjustments are made for other factors [4]. In addition, and as documented by the Society for Women's Health Research RAISE Project, women in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM) have received fewer awards than male colleagues for more than 2 decades [5]. Although some 2200 STEMM awards are available to both men and women, "the clear finding is that women do not receive recognition in a ratio anywhere near the percentage of women in their fields" [6]. Interestingly, an additional 117 STEMM awards are designated for women only.

Although awards have been studied in STEMM fields in general, to our knowledge this is the first report to address whether female physicians are underrepresented among recipients of recognition awards presented by a national medical specialty association that supports member career development. This is an exploratory investigation to determine the proportion of recognition awards given to female physicians by the AAPM&R and to evaluate whether the proportion has increased over time as the specialty of physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) has grown to include a greater proportion of female physiatrists.

Methods

During March 2016, a published online list of national past award recipients from the AAPM&R [7] was analyzed by physician researchers specializing in

physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R). The list included all major award recipients from 1968 to 2015. The study was deemed exempt from requiring institutional review board approval.

Eight award recipient lists were published online, including the following: (1) The Walter J. Zeiter Lecturers; (2) Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Lecturers; (3) PASSOR Legacy Award and Lectureship; (4) The Frank H. Krusen, MD Lifetime Achievement Award; (5) The Distinguished Member Award; (6) The Distinguished Clinician Award; (7) Outstanding Council Service Award; and, (8) The Distinguished Public Service Award. Included in the analysis were awards characterized as "physician only." Of the 8 awards, 7 met this criterion. The Frank H. Krusen, MD, Lifetime Achievement Award was treated as "physician only" because it was overwhelmingly given to physicians (35 physicians versus 1 male politician). Excluded from the analysis were any awards not published online as well as The Distinguished Public Service Award, as it was presented to a variety of individuals, including physicians, politicians, celebrities, family members, and others. In addition, although the format of The Walter J. Zeiter Lecture changed in 2015, the nonphysician male keynote speaker was not listed online and was therefore excluded from the analysis.

Three researchers independently gathered data from the published list of award recipients, including the number of years that the award had been given and the gender of each recipient. The gender of each recipient was verified via online search. During the study period, the researchers compared their results, and discrepancies were reviewed and resolved to ensure the accuracy of the findings. Data were compiled for all awards as a group and in individual award categories so that results could be reported over the association's 48 year history, over the last decade (2006-2015) and as trends within individual awards or groups of similar awards. For example, because 3 of the awards included lectureships, data were compiled to determine how often female versus male physicians had the opportunity to give these prestigious lectures to colleagues. In addition, because 2 awards were given to multiple recipients each year, compiled data also included the number of times that the awards were given to groups of male-only physicians, groups of female-only physicians, or groups comprising both male and female physicians. The main outcome measures were as follows: the proportion of male versus female physician awardees over the association's 48-year history; and the proportion of male versus female physician awardees over the past 10 years.

To assess the gender composition in the field of PM&R over time, gender-specific data from the following 3 sources were compiled: American Medical Association (AMA) [8], Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) [9-11], and AAPM&R (e-mail communication, April 2016).

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