

Current Perspective

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Gender and Leadership

The American Academy of Ophthalmology admitted its first woman member in 1904. Although there were remarkable women ophthalmologists in the first half of the 20th century, only in the last 30 or so years has the percentage of women in our profession really expanded. And it is even more recently that women have ascended to the highest positions of leadership. Overall, about 34% of physicians practicing in the United States in 2017 are women. Idaho has the lowest percentage (23%), and the District of Columbia has the highest (46%). What's the story for ophthalmology?

Currently, 24% of Academy members and fellows actively practicing in the United States are women. (Remember this statistic as you read on.)

Fully one-half of ophthalmology residents are women. How does that compare with other specialties? According to statistics from the Association of American Medical Colleges for the graduating class of 2014, the highest percentage of woman residents were in obstetrics/gynecology (85%) and pediatrics (75%). The lowest were in radiology (27%), neurosurgery, orthopedics, urology, and emergency medicine.

That's membership. What about leadership?

Of the 32,000 Academy members and fellows, about 900 give their valuable time and expertise to serve on Academy committees. Without them, the Academy quite simply couldn't function. They make up 155 committees (some serve on multiple committees) and each committee has a chair. Of the 155 committee chairs, 43 (28%) are women.

What about the Academy's Council? The Council is composed of the leaders of state societies, subspecialty societies, and special interest groups (such as the Association of Veterans Affairs Ophthalmologists). It meets twice a year and serves in an advisory capacity to the Board of Trustees and as a valuable conduit for information and opinions between the Board and the membership. Currently, of the 103 Councilors, 32% are women. They comprise 27% of the State Section and 42% of the Subspecialty Section. For the two years 2017 and 2018 (elections just completed), fully 50% of Council leadership positions are filled by women—including the upcoming Chair of the Council.

Women still lag in being appointed as chairs to lead academic departments of ophthalmology. While some of our

foremost institutions are chaired by women (Harvard/Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary, Thomas Jefferson/Wills Eye Hospital, University of Pennsylvania/Scheie Eye Institute, University of Wisconsin, and a few others), the percentage is not reflective of the percentage of women in academia.

Women hold the position of president in 13 of the state societies and in 9 of the major subspecialty/specialized interest societies. This includes the American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery (ASCRS), the American Glaucoma Society (AGS), The Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology (ARVO), the Cornea Society, and the National Medical Association Ophthalmology Section.

Finally, what about the Academy Board of Trustees and elected leadership? Over the past decade, 35% of Academy trustees have been women. Men still disproportionately represent the Academy as presidents, but 2 of your Academy's last 6 presidents are women—and 1 of those (Ruth Williams) now serves as *EyeNet's* Chief Medical Editor.

So, what's my takeaway from all this? Work still needs to be done in some areas to fully neutralize the inappropriate impact of gender on promotion, recognition, and compensation. However, I expect (and hope) that my successor (or my successor's successor) will be able to announce that the 50% of women ophthalmologists now in training will constitute 50% of the leadership positions. And from that point on, gender representation in ophthalmology leadership will become a nonissue. In the meantime, I truly believe that young women entering our wonderful profession have every reason to expect that, should they aspire to a position of professional leadership, the profession welcomes them, will hopefully use their talents and perspectives wisely, and will recognize and reward them for their contributions.



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