

Irish study: Why fewer female medical students choose surgery

Just 6.9% of female students say they never felt intimidated during their surgical training, compare to 15.8% of their male counterparts, according to a new study published by researchers at RCSI (Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland).



Image source: Getty/Gallo

The researchers analysed 464 questionnaires completed by medical students in Dublin, Perdana and Penang. Almost 40% of respondents were male and 60% were female. It also suggests that a lack of role models in surgery is perceived as a drawback by 22.8% of female medical students, with only 9.4% of their male counterparts feeling the same.

Career in surgery

The new study has found that male and female medical students were similar in terms of interest in a career in surgery – with 46.5% of males and 42.6% of females very or quite interested in a career in surgery. Yet, just 10% of surgeons in Ireland are female according to the 2017 Progress report by RCSI's Working Group on Gender Diversity, led by Professor Deborah McNamara.

"Achieving gender parity is vital for the future of all medical specialties, especially surgery. Female medical students are a particularly important group to consider on the quest to achieve gender balance within the specialty. We have shown that a high percentage of students will have decided on their career path before they have graduated, often having been influenced by role models along the way," said lead author, Dr Ciara Cronin, RCSI Department of Surgery.

"Greater female participation in surgical careers may normalise work plans that include job sharing, parental leave and career breaks enabling a greater number of both male and female surgeons to successfully combine a surgical career with social and family responsibilities."

Motivating factors

The study also looked at the motivating factors for students when choosing a medical field for their career. Female students were significantly more influenced in their choice of surgical career by part-time work, parental leave, working hours and length of residency. Male students were significantly more influenced by salary than females towards a choice of surgical career.

“According to our study, preference for a career in surgery declines with advancing years in medical school for both males and females. Medical students report high levels of feeling intimidated or ignored during their surgical placements, and enthusiasm for surgery reduces during medical school with exposure to this. These findings, along with the importance of role modelling, add further urgency to the need to address factors which make surgery less appealing to female medical graduates,” said Peter Gillen, associate professor of surgery at RCSI.

The intake to surgical training in Ireland remains high. There are currently 346 trainees across RCSI’s core and higher surgical training programmes; 216 are male and 130 are female.

“The Progress report identified an imperative that more is done to inform and encourage female medical students considering a career in surgery. This is an important research paper that will help RCSI to identify areas that need improvement. Over the last year, RCSI Dublin has established a student chapter affiliated with the Association of Women Surgeons to increase the access of RCSI medical students to female surgical mentors. This development was well received by students and it won best new student society for the 2018/19 academic year. Three specific surgical mentorship events have already taken place,” said McNamara.

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