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Association Helps Women Navigate the Medical Field

By Tiffani Sherman

It was the year when a German submarine sunk the Lusitania during World War I and Ford produced its millionth car. It was also the year a group of female physicians formed the organization now known as the American Medical Women's Association (AMWA).

Next year, AMWA will celebrate the 100th anniversary of its 1915 founding. For almost a century, AMWA has been calling attention to women's health issues and supporting women in medicine.

"We want to do anything we can to help women who want to come into the medical field," said Eliza Chin, MD, MPH, executive director of AMWA. "I think what we feel we represent is a way to give women a united front. Collectively, you can do much more than individually you can do."

Jackie Wong, national student president of AMWA and a fourth-year medical student at Northwestern University joined the organization her first year of medical school because she looked up to some of the other women in the group. She also wanted to learn more about what it's really like to pursue a career in medicine as a woman.

"It's kind of hard to come by organizations that promote women and women's leadership," she said.

Sometimes, approaching doctors is difficult for medical students because they don't want to bother them or be seen as too pushy, Wong said.

"AMWA gave me kind of an in," she added.

The relationships are organic. Women from all backgrounds work together on committees and attend AMWA meetings together. "It's one of the few organizations where you can have a medical student sitting next to a professor emeriti," Chin said.

"Women's health care brings us all together and the mentorship is like a natural result of communal projects," Wong added. "I think this in an easier and more productive way to get to know a physician. You're doing something you really enjoy with people who are like minded, in a way that is not forced. It really allows you to take your own ideas and find a group of equally motivated women and get in touch with them."

The mentoring goes both ways. The experienced doctors can learn from the younger ones. Medical students grew up with technology and find it easy to integrate it into medicine. "A lot of students come to the table with all sorts of ideas to get people connected," Wong said.

While professional mentoring is a big part of AMWA, members also discuss personal issues. Chin first got involved in AMWA about 10 years ago when she was trying to figure out exactly how to balance her career in internal medicine and a home life involving three young children.

Medical students often get so immersed in their schooling that they lose sight of what they really want for their futures, Wong said. "I think AMWA reminds you why you got into medicine and the kind of person you want to be," she said, adding it isn't just about the next test or the steps along the path to becoming a doctor.

With the recent addition of AMWA chapters for undergraduate students thinking of a career in medicine, the organization is broadening its scope.

Even though the number of women in medical schools is almost equal to the number of men, the number of female physician leaders is relatively small. From 2006 to 2011, the number of women medical school deans remained unchanged from 12 percent, and the number of assistant deans dropped two percentage points. For full-time medical school faculty in the advanced ranks of associate and full professors, the percentage of women increased an average of less than one percentage point per year between 2002 and 2012.

"I think women in medicine face some issues men in medicine don't face," Chin said, adding there is still some harassment and discrimination among some specialties.

But AMWA isn't just about advancing women in the field of medicine. It also looks to increase awareness of women's health issues. "Women and men often present differently even if it is the same disease," Chin said. "Fifty years ago, we didn't have women's health as a field."

Even though women make up a majority of AMWA members, men are more than welcome to join.

"It can't always be women promoting women's health," Wong said. "We're always looking for ways to get our allies involved."

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