

From Scalpel to Leadership: The Landscape for Female Neurosurgeons in the UK

Authors : Anda-veronica Gherman, Dimitrios Varthalitis

Abstract : Neurosurgery, like many surgical specialties, undoubtedly exhibits a significant gender gap, particularly in leadership positions. While increasing women representation in neurosurgery is important, it is crucial to increase their presence in leadership positions. Across the globe and Europe there are concerning trends of only 4% of all neurosurgical departments being chaired by women. This study aims to explore the situation regarding gender disparities in leadership in the United Kingdom and to identify possible contributing factors as well as discussing future strategies to bridge this gap. **Methods:** A literature review was conducted utilising PubMed as main database with search keywords including 'female neurosurgeon', 'women neurosurgeon', 'gender disparity', 'leadership' and 'UK'. Additionally, a manual search of all neurosurgical departments in the UK was performed to identify the current female department leads and training director leads. **Results:** The literature search identified a paucity of literature addressing specifically leadership in female neurosurgeons within the UK, with very few published papers specifically on this topic. Despite more than half of medical students in the UK being female, only a small proportion pursue a surgical career, with neurosurgery being one of the least represented specialties. Only 27% of trainee neurosurgeons are female, and numbers are even lower at a consultant level, where women represent just 8%. Findings from published studies indicated that only 6.6% of leadership positions in neurosurgery are occupied by women in the UK. Furthermore, our manual searches across UK neurosurgical departments revealed that around 5% of department lead positions are currently held by women. While this figure is slightly higher than the European average of 4%, it remains lower compared to figures of 10% in other North-West European countries. The situation is slightly more positive looking at the training directors, with 15% being female. **Discussion:** The findings of this study highlight a significant gender disparity in leadership positions within neurosurgery in the UK, which may have important implications, perpetuating the lack of diversity on the decision-making process, limiting the career advancement opportunities of women and depriving the neurosurgical field from the voices, opinions and talents of women. With women representing half of the population, there is an undeniable need for more female leaders at the policy-making level. There are many barriers that can contribute to these numbers, including bias, stereotypes, lack of mentorship and work-life balance. A few solutions to overcome these barriers can be training programs addressing bias and impostor syndrome, leadership workshops tailored for female needs, better workplace policies, increased in formal mentorship and increasing the visibility of women in neurosurgery leadership positions through media, speaking opportunities, conferences, awards etc. And lastly, more research efforts should focus on the leadership and mentorship of women in neurosurgery, with an increased number of published papers discussing these issues.

Keywords : female neurosurgeons, female leadership, female mentorship, gender disparities

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