

Study examines factors affecting whether women choose a medical research career

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Unless exposed to positive research experience and role models during their medical education and training, women are unlikely to consider careers in academic medicine seriously. That's one conclusion of an Oxford University study published in *The Lancet*. It asked why, when entry to medical schools is evenly split between men and women, those working in University medical departments are predominantly men.

In the UK, women make up 55% of [medical school](#) entrants but just 28% of faculty. In the US, they are 47% of entrants but 38% of faculty. The study reviewed 52 pieces of research evidence from the last thirty years to test eight themes often proffered as reasons for women's under-representation in the medical academic workforce.

Dr Laurel Edmunds, Senior Systematic Reviewer, said: 'Despite the focus on encouraging women to pursue an interest in medical sciences, we still lack comprehensive research evidence on what causes them to choose or reject a career in the subject. Most studies we reviewed had methodological limitations and were predominantly from North America. Further methodologically robust research, especially outside North America, is needed to establish the consistency of our review findings.'

The team did find that research evidence consistently pointed to a lack of adequate mentors and [role models](#) for women and to the deterrent effect of gender discrimination and unconscious bias experienced while still at medical school. They also found that women who were exposed to

medical research while in training were more likely to pursue a research career, and that studies showed that women were more likely to choose a teaching career over a research career.

Professor Alastair Buchan, Head of the Medical Sciences Division and Dean of Medicine at Oxford University initiated and led the research. He said: 'For four of the themes, we found both supporting and refuting evidence. For example, suggestions that women are less interested in research than men, or that they lose interest in research as education and [training](#) progress are not consistently supported by research evidence. We also found that evidence was conflicting on whether financial considerations and work-life balance deter women from a medical research career.'

Professor Trish Greenhalgh, Professor of Primary Care Health Sciences and a practicing GP said: 'The focus of further research should shift from individuals' career choices to the societies, organisations, and cultures within which those choices are made. There may be important confounding factors which explain women's choice or rejection of careers in [academic medicine](#). For example, some of the findings of this review may be explained by the phenomenon of stereotype threat - the idea that we stereotype ourselves as less good because we pick up on society's stereotypes, and underperform as a result.'

Dr Pavel Ovseiko, Senior Research Fellow in Health Policy and Management, said: 'What inconsistency of findings across reviewed studies suggests is that there are significant opportunities to overcome barriers by creating a more supportive and inclusive university culture and work environment. Winning the talent war for women in academic medicine requires a combination of practical measures and inspirational leadership from both women and men.'

This study was supported by Oxford University's John Fell Fund and the

Vice Chancellor's Diversity Fund, and by the NIHR Oxford Biomedical Research Centre.

The research comes as Oxford launches a new website for women interested in careers in medical sciences. The site, <http://www.womeninscience.ox.ac.uk>, includes interviews with [women](#) scientists from Oxford at various stages of their careers, talking frankly about topics a variety of issues including obtaining funding, career progression, mentorship, and parenting.

More information: Why do women choose or reject careers in academic medicine? A narrative review of empirical evidence, *The Lancet* [DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736\(15\)01091-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)01091-0)).

Provided by University of Oxford

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