

# Gaps in representation of women and younger scholars among medical educators

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Women make up just 37.7% of all speakers at hematology and medical oncology board review lectures, according to a study published today in *Blood Advances*. Its findings call attention to the many barriers people

underrepresented in medicine face in obtaining educational opportunities that can be vital to career advancement and job security in academia.

Each year, students, trainees, and practicing physicians attend a collection of lectures given by leading practitioners in their selected [medical specialty](#), in preparation to sit for their boards, a set of exams they must pass to practice medicine in the field. Speakers are selected based on their experience in medicine, interest in education, and professional accomplishments. Through their lectures, they inform their audience on what the board exam will look like, how to tackle varying question styles, review exam content, and offer test-taking strategies.

"Hundreds of people attend these lectures and speaking at them brings faculty tremendous visibility in their field," said the study author Samer A. Al'Hadidi, MD, MS, a [hematology](#) and oncology physician at the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute. "Being selected as a [speaker](#) at these lectures is a prestigious opportunity that enhances professional development and advancement."

Dr. Al'Hadidi and colleagues collected speaker data for all board review [lecture](#) series conducted annually or biannually between 2017 through 2021. They analyzed lecture titles, [speakers'](#) names, gender, and institutional affiliation, lecture series location, and whether it was related to board certification in hematology, oncology, or both.

Their results showed that [women](#) make up roughly 37.7% of all speakers at hematology and medical oncology board review lectures. Notably, researchers found that these [gender disparities](#) only became more pronounced when sorted by subject area, with women representing 24.8% of speakers presenting on malignant hematology, 38.9% of those presenting on [solid tumors](#), and 44.1% of speakers lecturing on classical (benign) hematology.

Investigators did observe an overall increase in female speakers over the years throughout the study period, suggesting that the field is becoming increasingly diverse. In fact, women constituted over 50% of speakers at ASH's courses in 2020 and 2021. In recent years, several institutions and medical societies have aimed to address this disparity by implementing working groups to promote the contributions of underrepresented minorities in hematology and oncology.

Notably, Dr. Al'Hadidi and colleagues also found that most speakers had more than 15 years of field experience since their initial certification. Choosing older and more experienced speakers over junior faculty not only keeps young professionals from engaging in [educational opportunities](#) but also poses a disadvantage for lecture attendees. Dr. Al'Hadidi explained that physicians who took their boards more recently are more likely to remember the broad scope of content the exam encompasses. They will also be more familiar with the format of the test and be more likely to anticipate questions or content topics that could appear on the exam.

Limitations of the study include that authors were unable to weigh the perceived prestige of certain conferences over others, and how this may affect the value of lecture opportunities. They also did not factor in the varying levels of institutional support speakers may have been given to leave work and give the lectures, which may also have been a barrier to entry for those invited who could not take leave.

Looking forward, Dr. Al'Hadidi explained that one way to improve speaker representation is to work with [academic institutions](#) to get more women and junior faculty on lecture organizing and planning committees. He also pointed out that while women make up nearly half of medical students in the U.S., and more than half of physicians in select practices like family medicine and pediatrics, they still face disadvantages in many specialties and in obtaining academic

opportunities.

"I'm hopeful that when we reassess these findings five years from now, we'll continue to see improvements, and hopefully have reached or be close to reaching that 50:50 ratio of male and female lecture speakers," said Dr. Al'Hadidi. "Increasing female and junior faculty representation in this space will help junior faculty and women obtain academic appointments, stay in academia, and increase career satisfaction."

**More information:** Sebawe Syaj et al, Gender and Early-career Faculty Disparities in Hematology and Oncology Board Review Lecture Series, *Blood Advances* (2022). [DOI: 10.1182/bloodadvances.2022008120](https://doi.org/10.1182/bloodadvances.2022008120)

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