

Can intergenerational mentorship programs reduce ageism in medicine?

March 1 2024



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Ageism is a problem in health care, and the [World Health Organization Global Report on Ageism](#) points to factors such as increased human life expectancy, declines in birthrates, and the lack of investment to address

health inequities among older people as reasons for strategies to eliminate ageism.

Ageism can impact the quality of patient care and be a source of frustration for older patients. Senior Mentor Programs (SMP) are one way to address [ageism](#) and improve the quality of care delivered to older patients by better understanding their unique needs, perspectives, and societal contributions.

Intergenerational mentoring programs are beneficial to both young and older people, according to a new study led by Emily Ihara, chair of George Mason University's Department of Social Work, and Catherine Tompkins, the College of Public Health's Associate Dean for Faculty and Staff Affairs, who are co-PIs of Mason's Geriatrics Workforce Enhancement Program.

"The results show the importance of reciprocal relationships, where both young and older people benefit, in addressing ageism in [health care](#)," said Ihara.

"The program served to defy existing stereotypes especially for younger medical students who may not have had experience working with [older adults](#). Building relationships with an older mentor helped them to gain a better understanding and much-needed perspective of older people, which will hopefully translate into better provision of care for this population."

The team from George Mason University and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) analyzed the perspectives of older adults (mentors) who participated in a SMP involving first-year [medical students](#). Three themes emerged from the mentors' responses: generational guidance, volunteerism, and life satisfaction. Their work, "[Don't treat us like fragile babies': Mentors' Perspectives of an Intergenerational Mentoring](#)

[Program for Medical Students.](#)" was published online in the *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*.

The responses illustrated how intergenerational mentorship programs can help older adults maintain a desire to promote the well-being of younger generations (such as by volunteering) by providing an opportunity for older adults to form meaningful connections ([life satisfaction](#)) and positively influence members of the younger generation (generational guidance). Participants in the study spoke about wanting to help stop health-related discrimination toward older people.

"Do whatever it takes to get medical personnel to treat and understand older adults. We are not wrinkly old babies, which is how a lot of doctors treat us," said one participant.

The SMP provided older adults the opportunity to have an open conversation with students in the medical field and address the stigma related to caring for older adults. For example, several mentors discussed being treated unfairly or being misunderstood when receiving medical services. The program allowed older adults to connect with students and to pass on advice or experiences that they believe are important to improve patient care. Student responses to the program were analyzed in a different academic paper.

More information: Emily S. Ihara et al, "Don't Treat Us Like Fragile Babies": Mentors' Perspectives of an Intergenerational Mentoring Program for Medical Students, *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* (2024). [DOI: 10.1080/15350770.2024.2310654](https://doi.org/10.1080/15350770.2024.2310654)

Provided by George Mason University

Citation: Can intergenerational mentorship programs reduce ageism in medicine? (2024, March 1) retrieved 28 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-03-intergenerational-mentorship-ageism-medicine.html>

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