

Female medical students report higher rates of feeling intimidated in surgical attachments

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A greater number of female medical students have experienced intimidation in their training than their male counterparts, according to a new research study published by researchers at RCSI (Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland).

15.8% of male medical students reported that they had never felt intimidated during their surgical attachments, compared to just 6.9% of female students. A third of male students never felt discouraged, but only a quarter of female students felt the same.

The researchers analysed 464 questionnaires completed by medical students in Dublin, Perdana and Penang. Almost 40% of respondents were male and 60% were female. The findings have been published in the [latest online edition](#) of the *Postgraduate Medical Journal*.

The research also suggests that a lack of role models in surgery is perceived as a drawback by 22.8% of female medical students, with only 9.4% of their male counterparts feeling the same.

The new study has found that male and female medical students were similar in terms of interest in a career in surgery—with 46.5% of males and 42.6% of females very or quite interested in a career in surgery. Yet, just 10 percent of surgeons in Ireland are female according to the [2017 Progress report](#) by RCSI's Working Group on Gender Diversity, led by Professor Deborah McNamara.

"Achieving gender parity is vital for the future of all medical specialties, especially surgery. Female medical students are a particularly important group to consider on the quest to achieve gender balance within the specialty. We have shown that a high percentage of students will have decided on their career path before they have graduated, often having been influenced by role models along the way," said lead author Dr. Ciara Cronin, RCSI Department of Surgery.

"Greater female participation in surgical careers may normalise work plans that include job sharing, [parental leave](#) and career breaks enabling a greater number of both male and female surgeons to successfully combine a surgical career with social and family responsibilities."

The study also looked at the motivating factors for students when choosing a medical field for their career. Female students were significantly more influenced in their choice of surgical career by part-time work, parental leave, working hours and length of residency. Male students were significantly more influenced by salary than females towards a choice of surgical career.

"According to our study, preference for a career in surgery declines with advancing years in medical school for both males and females. Medical students report high levels of feeling intimidated or ignored during their surgical placements, and enthusiasm for surgery reduces during medical school with exposure to this. These findings, along with the importance of role modelling, add further urgency to the need to address factors which make surgery less appealing to female medical graduates," said Prof Peter Gillen, Associate Professor of Surgery at RCSI.

The intake to surgical training in Ireland remains high. There are currently 346 trainees across RCSI's core and higher surgical training programmes; 216 are male and 130 are female.

Professor Deborah McNamara said, "The PROGRESS report identified an imperative that more is done to inform and encourage female medical students considering a [career](#) in [surgery](#). This is an important research paper that will help RCSI to identify areas that need improvement. Over the last year, RCSI Dublin has established a [student](#) chapter affiliated with the Association of Women Surgeons to increase the access of RCSI [medical students](#) to female surgical mentors. This development was well received by students and it won best new student society for the 2018/19 academic year. Three specific surgical mentorship events have already taken place."

More information: Ciara Cronin et al, Are we reaping what we sow? Gender diversity in surgery: a survey of medical students, *Postgraduate Medical Journal* (2019). [DOI: 10.1136/postgradmedj-2018-136136](https://doi.org/10.1136/postgradmedj-2018-136136)

Provided by RCSI

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