
Healthcare Gender Gap: 18% of Hospital CEOs Are Women



A white paper published online by San Francisco-based healthcare startup supporter Rock Health reports that women make up 18 percent of US hospital CEOs, and four percent of healthcare company CEOs. These facts contrast with the finding that women comprise 73 percent of health services and medical managers and 47 percent of medical school graduates. The report is based on public data gathered from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and Thomson Reuters, along with internal research conducted by Rock Health by reaching out to women in healthcare.

Given the low percentage of women in healthcare CEO positions, it is possible that the obstacles to be overcome are deeply rooted in the industry, although some may be unconscious biases. One of the main hurdles is a lack of women already in top positions to show other women what is possible. Iya Khalil, Co-Founder and Executive Vice President of GNS Healthcare, is quoted as saying "I believe the lack of women executive leaders (in terms of numbers compared to men) is due to not having enough role models and women not knowing what they can achieve in this space."

Katie Vahle, Co-Founder and Patient Advocate of CoPatient, is also quoted in the Rock Health presentation: "I think it is a natural tendency to hire, promote and mentor individuals who are most like you so by virtue of fewer women in senior leadership positions I think that dynamic contributes to a woman's ability to advance."

Another consideration is that women are less likely to have sponsorship from mentors who can positively influence their career trajectory. According to the firm's survey of 100 women with healthcare careers, 43 percent of women cited "Ability to connect with senior leadership" as a major barrier to career advancement. Nearly 50 percent of women said that self-confidence was a limiting factor.

Is the CEO Gender Gap Specific to Healthcare?

Change may be slow in healthcare because of historical patterns, where male doctors wrote orders and women made sure they were carried out. Mary Lee is the vice president for consulting services for healthcare revenue cycle management company Adreima. She said, "There's a class system within a large health system and you are in your place. If you're female there's a track for you and if you're a male there's a track for you."

To move up on the career track, many women not only leave their current role but must change companies, since internal promotions are not always encouraged. Lee believes that may change as more female students graduate from medical schools and take roles in healthcare organisations, particularly at executive levels. "I think in ten years we're going to see that evolution," said Lee.

Victoria Pyncheon, co-founder of Los Angeles-based career consultancy She Negotiates, suggests that healthcare is not the only industry with a low percentage of women in C-level positions. "Women are in the teens in leadership positions in the law, finance, business and all other male-dominated industries," she said. "The reasons for women being in the teens includes being pushed out, not opting out. The forces pushing women out of the money and out of power in male-dominated industries include the paucity of women at the top, signalling to many women that their chances are far less than average for the amount of work required by both men and women to reach the corner office."

Recommendations for promoting female leaders in healthcare include showcasing the successes of other women, serving as mentors to other women so that relationships are built on multiple levels, and speaking out on blogs and at conferences.

Reference: Rock Health, Healthcare DIVE

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Published on : Tue, 16 Dec 2014