

Public release date: 20-Jul-2009

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Most women would choose surgical profession again

CHICAGO – Most women surgeons would choose their career again, although many would favor more options for part-time or other alternative work schedules, according to a report in the July issue of Archives of Surgery, one of the JAMA/Archives journals.

Over the past three decades, women have increased their presence in the surgical field, according to background information in the article. "In the medical field, a career in surgery has significant lifestyle implications: the profession is associated with high degrees of patient acuity, significant on-call responsibility and irregular work hours, all requiring a significant commitment of personal time," the authors write. "The extent to which the surgical workplace has evolved to accommodate women and their role in family life is unknown to the public, in general, and to the upcoming generation of women physicians, in particular."

To assess professional and personal situations, perceptions and challenges for both male and female surgeons, Kathrin M. Troppmann, M.D., of the UC Davis Medical Center, Sacramento, Calif., and colleagues mailed a questionnaire to all surgeons board certified in 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000 or 2004. Of 3,507 surgeons, 895 (25.5 percent) responded, of whom 178 (20.3 percent) were women and 698 (79.7 percent) were men.

Among the surgeons who responded:

- General surgery was the most common specialty among both sexes (39.3 percent of women and 46.7 percent of men); more women than men specialized in breast surgery (20.2 percent vs. 1.3 percent) and fewer specialized in vascular surgery (2.9 percent vs. 10.3 percent), but essentially there were no other sex differences in subspecialties
- Most women (82.5 percent) and men (77.5 percent) would choose surgery as a profession again, and 83.5 percent of women and 61.3 percent of men would recommend surgery as a career choice to women

- Men worked a median (midpoint) of 65 hours a week, compared with 60 for women
- More women (8.5 percent) than men (3.2 percent) had ever worked part-time as a clinical surgeon, and women were less likely to disagree with the statement that more part-time work opportunities should be available for surgeons (33.3 percent vs. 55.5 percent)
- Women were significantly less likely than men to have a spouse who did not work outside the home (9.4 percent vs. 56.3 percent)
- Women surgeons were also less likely than men to have children (63.8 percent vs. 91.3 percent), as were surgeons of the younger generation (board certified in 2000 or 2004); more women than men surgeons had children later in life, after entering surgical practice (62.4 percent vs. 32 percent)
- More women than men reported that maternity leave was important (67.8 percent vs. 30.8 percent) and that child care should be available at work (86.5 percent vs. 69.7 percent)

"In conclusion, most women surgeons would choose the surgical profession again. This highly positive perception should be pointed out to women considering a surgical career," the authors conclude. "To foster realistic expectations among medical students, the rewarding and challenging aspects of the surgical profession must be pointed out. Finally, our study results suggest that maximizing recruitment and retention of women surgeons will include giving serious consideration to alternative work schedules and optimization of maternity leave and child care opportunities."

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(Arch Surg. 2009; 144[7]:635-642. Available pre-embargo to the media at www.jamamedia.org.)

Editor's Note: This work was supported by the American College of Surgeons and the Association of Women Surgeons. Please see the article for additional information, including other authors, author contributions and affiliations, financial disclosures, funding and support, etc.

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