Women outnumber men enrolling in medical school

By Steven Ross Johnson | December 18, 2017 | Modern Healthcare

New data released Monday show that the number of women enrolling in medical school has exceeded the number of male first-year students for the first time.

According to the Association of American Medical Colleges, women represented 50.7% of the more than 21,000 new medical school enrollees in 2017. Men still make up 51% of total enrollment in U.S. medical schools in 2017, but the number of women applying to medical school has been on the rise in recent years, compared to a decline in male applicants.

The number of female first-year medical students increased by 3.2% in 2017 over the previous year, and has grown by more than 9% since 2015 while the number of male enrollees fell by 2.3% over the past two years.

"We are very encouraged by the growing number of women enrolling in U.S. medical schools," said Dr. Darrell Kirch, AAMC president and CEO in a written statement. "This year's matriculating class demonstrates that medicine is an increasingly attractive career for women and that medical schools are creating an inclusive environment. While we have much more work to do to attain broader diversity among our students, faculty, and leadership, this is a notable milestone."

The changing demographic reflects an overall shift in priorities for physicians, as more hope to achieve a positive work-life balance. A recent AAMC survey of first-year medical school students found 47% of respondents reported having a good work-life balance as their top consideration when they were ready to start their career.

Potential employers increasingly use incentives like flexible work hours to entice physicians to join their ranks. A growing number of doctors leaving the profession have cited increased anxiety as a factor in their decision, with about half of physicians reporting plans to retire, reduce their hours or leave their clinical positions as a result, according to a 2016 report from the Physicians Foundation.

Potential employers have noticed the change. More companies are offering flexible work hours to entice physicians to join their ranks.

Dr. Kimberly Templeton, immediate past president for the American Medical Women's Association, said burnout seems to occur more frequently in women physicians than men since they are more likely to take on the demands of family caregiving, even in households where both parents work.

"My hope is that as more women come into the profession those issues will be more broadly discussed," Templeton said. "It is more of an issue when more and more of the people who are being impacted by this are part of the healthcare workforce."

Roughly a third of physicians in the U.S. are women. Templeton hopes that as more women enter the field, there will be more conversations on other issues affecting women in healthcare,
such as the dearth of women physicians in leadership roles in many of the country’s largest health systems or professional medical organizations.

In addition, Templeton said she hopes sexual harassment cases in the physician workforce will receive more attention, including women physicians being harassed by male colleagues and patients, as well as understanding how that harassment is fully defined within the healthcare setting.

"There are things that fit into a much broader definition of sexual harassment—the microaggressions, the denigration of someone’s capabilities based on their sex or gender, and the gender bias—all fit within a newer, broader definition of sexual harassment that are much more common," Templeton said.