

What Can I Do?

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What Women in Medicine Can Do to Strengthen the Impact of Utah Girls and Women

UTAH WOMEN &
LEADERSHIP
Project

Utah is full of engaged, passionate individuals who frequently ask the question, “What can I personally and/or professionally do to strengthen the impact of Utah girls and women?” To provide specific answers to that question, the **Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP)** hosted a series of “think tank” gatherings to collect best practices for various stakeholders interested in supporting and empowering Utah women.

This idea sheet is based on a 2019 gathering of 25 female medical practitioners (physicians and advanced practice providers). Well-informed health care providers are uniquely positioned to support and strengthen girls and women over a lifetime. This discussion focused on how practitioners can influence through providing quality patient care, serving as visible role models, educating their communities, mentoring, and advocating broadly to promote women’s wellbeing.

PATIENT CARE

The day-to-day work of providing direct patient care is perhaps the most foundational way healthcare providers can influence girls and women. Doctors are some of the first professionals a young girl will encounter, and doctor/patient relationships can last a lifetime, with many moments of contact occurring during critical life junctures. Female physicians often find themselves holding a unique position of trust, and they can help girls and women address distinct life challenges by doing the following:

- Recognize that because much of the research and standards of care in medicine have used men as a model, caregivers must be proactive and sensitive to ways women’s medical needs are different and should be treated as such.
- Identify key moments throughout a lifespan where healthcare issues are gender-specific and make a point to cover these explicitly with female patients.

- Explore ways to support girls and teens as they navigate puberty, including physical, mental, and emotional aspects such as decreased confidence, negative body image, social media issues, diminished physical activity levels, dating and relationships, and changes in mental health. Ensure teenagers have access to resources in terms of sex education (particularly for those at high risk or lacking parental engagement).
- Assess female patients for signs of abuse or domestic violence; utilize screening tools and provide educational materials/resources to establish trust.
- Discuss self-care and burnout for women in high-pressure situations; invite conversations about life challenges that have negative health implications.
- Identify barriers women face in terms of scheduling, accessing, and paying for care, including both screenings and procedures; facilitate problem solving and support women’s efforts to prioritize their own health.

ROLE MODELING

Women in medicine can be powerful role models in their communities as they are highly respected professionals who are often balancing a variety of roles. Such practitioners have a positive influence as they engage in visible and public activities:

- Find and create opportunities to highlight their work in public settings (e.g., visiting elementary and secondary schools, partnering with girls' and women's groups, serving as volunteer healthcare providers for sports teams and youth excursions, writing editorials, speaking at charity events).
- Be authentic in discussing both the challenges and opportunities that come with a demanding career; combat perfectionism and address failures, but also celebrate the benefits of rewarding work.
- Normalize the authority of women providers by modeling confidence, using the title of "Dr." when applicable, and nominating women for awards.
- Accept opportunities to serve in leadership positions both within the medical field and beyond, including serving on boards or running for public office.
- Find ways to highlight female practitioners from a wide variety of backgrounds and life experiences to demonstrate there are many pathways to working in the healthcare industry.
- Conduct internal diversity assessments to see where attention should be focused when working toward gender equity.
- Promote women's participation in formal leadership programs (locally and nationally).
- Encourage women in entry-level positions to continue their education and pursue higher-level careers (both clear achievers and those with potential).
- Invite female students to job-shadow; openly share the challenges, creative solutions, and successes along the road to a career in medicine.
- Network intentionally with other professionals to identify opportunities for women to learn and grow.
- Create improved childcare options to enable working mothers to continue their career advancement.
- Be proactive in designing roles and opportunities for women to lead in healthcare (in both workplaces and professional organizations).
- Publicize opportunities among women students, junior employees, and peers, including scholarships, initiatives, conferences, and awards.
- Engage male allies who will both mentor and sponsor female colleagues.

COMMUNITY EDUCATION

In addition to serving as public role models, women in medicine can use their knowledge and experience to educate key stakeholders, as well as the general public, about health-related topics. Practitioners can inform their communities in the following ways:

- Seek out, create, and share statistics and other data on key metrics related to women's health; such information (including shifting trends) is vital to generate the urgency that will lead to needed changes.
- Identify appropriate venues for providing health information for the entire spectrum of a woman's life (e.g., schools, churches, social organizations, public safety offices, workplaces); train influencers in these areas who can then educate their own communities.
- Sponsor community programs (e.g., "Ladies' Night Out," teen youth councils) that combine girls'/women's health education and promotion with self-care and wellness activities.
- Engage men in the process of educating other men and boys about the importance of women's health.
- Be bold in publicly discussing important yet sometimes sensitive topics that affect women's health, including sex education, depression, anxiety, violence, abuse, and substance use disorders.
- Emphasize the economic benefits to society that come from addressing health care needs proactively, including preventative care and mental health treatment.
- Raise awareness of the social determinants that are related to the overall health of a population, including economics, education, social support, physical environment, and community factors.

MENTORSHIP

Female physicians are well-positioned to advise and mentor. And through professional development, they can elevate the stature of women in an industry where many women work, but few rise to high levels of leadership. They can:

ADVOCACY

Finally, women in medicine can use their voices and influence to advocate for issues, programs, and policies that will contribute to better health outcomes for Utah women and girls. Practitioners can make a difference by engaging as follows:

- Stand for gender equity in all settings, especially in terms of health; identify gaps and call for action.
- Promote public policies that benefit women, including increased access to Medicaid, funding for telemedicine to reach those in rural areas, and protections for women at risk of violence.
- Support organizations working to benefit women's health through fundraising, volunteering, public speaking, and serving in leadership positions.
- Be proactive in promoting wellness (e.g., creating incentives for healthy behaviors), but also in decreasing stigma surrounding health challenges such as mental health and substance use disorders.
- Work to reduce barriers for women who struggle to access care (e.g., adjust costs for low-income or uninsured patients, facilitate communication for non-English speakers, reach out to the LGBTQ+ population).
- Recognize that engaging in important causes is one way busy physicians can fight burnout; working with vision and purpose can bring renewal.

CONCLUSION

Women in medicine have the distinct opportunity to both reach women individually and influence the larger society on behalf of all women and girls. As informed practitioners thoughtfully and intentionally continue these efforts, they will improve the lives of Utah women, their families, and the state as a whole.

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