



# The Advancement of Women Physicians to Managerial Roles in Israel's Health System – A Gender Perspective

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# Abstract

## Introduction

In recent years, the public discourse in the western world has given increasing attention to issues of gender equality. Gaps between men and women in the world of employment – as regards rewards, advancement tracks, and participation in management positions – affect many professions, including health. In Israel's health system, the rate of women employees is high, including among physicians, while their representation in management is far lower. This is especially true of hospitals, where the rate of female physicians in management is particularly low, despite the fact that for most of the 1990s and subsequently, the rate of females licensed as physicians has been at least 45%. In contrast, in the health plans and the Ministry of Health (MoH), women's representation in management is higher.

The MoH is establishing a committee to discuss workforce challenges in the health system from the perspective of gender. As part of the input into these discussions, the MoH asked the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute (MJB) to conduct an exploratory study by means of interviews with female physicians who have reached senior positions in the health system, particularly in hospitals, and to examine the factors contributing to, or impeding, this achievement. The MoH also asked MJB to propose ways in which these issues can be assessed quantitatively in future studies.

## Study Goals

1. To describe the career paths of female physicians who have reached senior positions in the health system, with emphasis on hospitals
2. To understand the factors that helped the female physicians in senior positions advance in their careers, the factors that impeded them, and how they coped with the latter

3. To identify practical proposals for the removal of barriers to the advancement of female physicians in the health system.
4. To recommend ways to examine these topics quantitatively in future research.

## Methods

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with 13 female physicians in senior management positions in hospitals, the MoH, and academia. The interviews ceased when we reached a saturation point, no new topics being raised. The interviews addressed their career paths, the factors making it easier or harder for them to advance, and their perceptions of the issue of gender inequality in senior management positions in Israel's health system. In addition, background interviews were held with two male hospital directors (one current, and one former) and with an MoH human resources director to obtain a further perspective on the topic.

As background to the interviews, and to better understand the topic, we conducted a review of the literature on the employment and advancement of female physicians in Israel and around the world.

## Main findings

### Advancement towards management positions

Two main motifs emerged from the interviews on the topic of advancement to management positions: Some of the interviewees said that they were goal-oriented and had early on set themselves a target, or that they had adopted an active approach to achieve the positions; some said that they had progressed naturally from one position to another until they had arrived at their current place. The interviewees did not describe the road to management as fraught with struggle, despite the existence of various barriers and obstacles.

## Barriers, challenges and contributing factors

The main challenge on the path of professional advancement related to management of the work-home conflict. Additional challenges mentioned were the lack of mentoring, the male workplace culture, lower salaries than the men received in comparable positions, and the difficulty of integrating academic activity into their work. The contributing factors cited by the interviewees were emotional and practical support at home, striving towards excellence at work, the support of a mentor, a position of command during military service, and the filling of organization-wide positions, which facilitated professional networking. Furthermore, experience working in academic or service delivery frameworks abroad and the development of a specific professional niche were cited as factors contributing to their attainment of their leading positions. Some of the interviewees noted that they regarded their feminine qualities as an advantage that they brought to management and as helpful in the process of reaching management since women are more willing than men to assume mid-level organization-wide positions. Though not prestigious, these positions facilitate the networking that later promotes career advancement.

## Inequality in the health system

The interviewees said that they had not experienced a different attitude towards themselves on the basis of their being women. Their words and stories, however, did reveal incidents in which they or their colleagues had experienced discrimination. Apparently, they did not attribute great importance to these incidents or had not allowed them to stop them.

Various approaches were voiced on the question of affirmative action. Some interviewees supported it, while others had reservations about it. The later indicated a belief that changes in the balance of female representation in the

system would come about naturally, given the increase in the rate of women among physicians.

## Practical suggestions at the systemic level

The interviewees suggested a variety of measures at the systemic level that would ease the advancement path of women to management positions. Some of these had also been raised by the Israel Medical Association task force to promote the status of women in medicine in Israel, such as integrating women into search committees. Furthermore, suggestions were made to young women aspiring to advance professionally, on ways to cope with the difficulties they would face down the road.

## Possible Avenues for Continued Examination of the Topic

The current study was the first Israeli study to examine the perceptions of Israeli female physicians in senior positions on the question of the factors promoting or inhibiting their advancement towards management. The in-depth interviews generated important themes that should be assessed quantitatively in subsequent studies. We propose three specific avenues for further research:

**Survey of female physicians at various levels:** The themes and hypotheses generated by the in-depth interviews could prove helpful in the construction of a large-scale, representative national survey of female physicians as regards expectations, programs, and difficulties at the start of the road.

**Analysis of data from the records of search committees for managerial positions:** An analysis of data from the records of search committees for hospital management positions in recent years will help understand which women pursue management roles, the percentage of women hired (in

comparison with men), the composition of the committees and so forth, and the extent to which these phenomena have changed over time.

**Analysis of data from a survey of young specialists:** MJB is currently conducting a survey of board-certified physicians in their first-year after completing their residencies. It examines the factors affecting the choice and framework of their work and, among other things, it asks about their aspirations to attain management positions in the future. The responses will allow a comparison of the responses of male and female physicians on this and other questions.