Orthopaedic Association Awards Grant to Miller School Program Aimed at Mentoring Future Female Orthopaedic Surgeons

Julianne Muñoz, M.D. assistant professor of orthopaedics at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine, knows her medical specialty suffers from gender inequality, and she wants to do something about it.

"Orthopaedics is the most female-underrepresented specialty in medicine — even more so than the male-dominated specialties of urology and neurosurgery," Dr. Muñoz said.

Females make up only about 6 to 7% of the membership of the world’s largest medical association of musculoskeletal specialists, the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons (AAOS).

Part of the problem is that myths about how women aren’t cut out for orthopedics continue to make medical students think twice — or worse, choose another specialty, according to Dr. Muñoz.

“A lot of what we see is female med students will take an
interest in orthopaedics but often get dissuaded from continuing onto the specialty for completely stereotypical reasons. People will say things like ‘Orthopaedics is a boys’ club,’ or ‘You need to be big and strong to do orthopaedics,’” Dr. Munoz said. “The sad thing is the vast majority of the time it is not orthopaedic surgeons who are telling young women they shouldn’t consider the dream to pursue orthopedic surgery.”

In 2022, to help set the record straight about what it’s like to be a woman in orthopedics, Dr. Muñoz launched a mentorship group for female medical students, residents, fellows, and attendings, called the Female Orthopedists of Miami Mentorship Organization.

**Program and Mentorship Have Expanded**

The Miller School-based program has quickly grown and has been so promising that the AAOS earmarked $3,600 of funding for it through the association’s Inspiring Diversity, Equity, and Access (IDEA) grant program.

The mentors of today’s program include not only female orthopaedic attendees from the Miller School but also private practice orthopedists throughout Miami.

“There are all our trainees – orthopedic fellows, residents, and any med students in the orthopedic interest group. From there it expanded to students from other schools. Now we also have Florida International University and Nova students just from word of mouth,” Dr. Muñoz said.

Twenty to 25 mentees attend the program’s six annual in-person lectures delivered by female orthopedic surgeons in the group. Many of these lectures are given in mentors’ homes or local
restaurants. Topics address such things as navigating family life in the specialty, goal setting, sexual harassment at work, self-care, and interpersonal relationships with support staff and in the operating room.

Alina Syros, a third-year medical student at the Miller School, didn’t realize how male-dominated orthopaedics was until she shadowed surgeons in the hospital.

“I wasn’t seeing many female orthopedic surgeons. I was shocked the first time joined this group to see how many women were there,” said Syros, who is getting ready to apply for an orthopaedics residency. “This group really has been a really nice space for me to ask questions that maybe I couldn’t ask male orthopaedic surgeons — things like how do you do family planning? Can you have kids during residency?”

Syros, who also thought one had to be super strong to practice orthopaedic surgery, has since learned from “petite” women in the specialty that it isn’t true.

Dr. Muñoz said the next step in the program’s growth is to open it to first-year medical students.

“We want to reach these women when they’re young, because they start hearing these falsehoods when they start their rotations and during their second year of medical school,” she said. “It would be good to include all the first-year students, so they can hear what it’s like in the specialty directly from the female orthopaedic surgeons.”

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