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Healthcare organizations advance the stories of women in healthcare

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The Buzz This Week

This month, women from across the healthcare continuum are taking an active role in telling the story of women's roles and contributions in healthcare. Every March, the United States observes Women's History Month, an annual practice since 1987, when Congress designated the month to honor and reflect on women's contributions. Every year, women are recognized for their achievements in history, culture, society, the economy, and policy. The National Women's History Alliance chooses a theme each year that honors multicultural American women.

This year's designated theme is "Celebrating Women Who Tell Our Stories." This theme focuses on women's impact, past and present, in media of all types—including radio, television, stage, and art. Effective storytelling can teach, influence, and inspire others.

In connection to this year's theme, many healthcare organizations are spotlighting female employees—from administrators to clinicians—by sharing their narratives. These women are reflecting on their careers, contemplating the meaning of the month, offering advice for future generations, and providing their perspective on what still needs to happen. At Beth Israel Lahey Health, a female administrator shares her story of being a leader in an industry with overwhelmingly male-dominated leadership and is steadfast in using her influence to positively impact the next generation of female healthcare professionals. Hackensack Meridian highlights female employees who started their careers as front-line nurses and now hold leadership positions at the health system. University of Michigan spotlights Paula Lantz, PhD, a policy expert who points out the social determinants of disparities in maternal health. She notes that "changes in public policy are the most efficient way to see changes in overall health levels in a population."

These narratives promote awareness and appreciation of women's history in the context of healthcare. In addition, the month serves as a time to acknowledge all women and girls. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Xavier Becerra shared in observance of Women's History Month, "At

HHS, we know that the only way to improve the health and well-being of all Americans is to eradicate the racial, gender, and economic barriers that make it hard for women and girls—especially women and girls of color—to access health care.” The nation must continue to work toward a future in which all women and girls have access to safe and affordable healthcare, regardless of economic status or race, to ensure equitable access and better health outcomes.

Why It Matters

The month of March is an important time to recognize women in the healthcare workforce. According to the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), 75% of the U.S. healthcare workforce is women, which is concentrated in nursing and lower-wage healthcare jobs, such as home health aides. New data released from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) indicates an increase in the proportion of women in the physician workforce. According to the [AAMC's 2021 data](#), women make up more than one-third (37%) of active physicians in the U.S., up from 30% in 2010. In addition, the AAMC reports 47% of residents and fellows in 2021 were women. Though female representation is high in select positions and increasing for physicians, serious challenges still exist.

The COVID-19 pandemic created a shift in the workforce and caused a mass exodus of workers, with a specific impact on women. [Several studies report](#) as of 2022, the healthcare industry lost nearly 20% of its workforce over the past 2 years, including 30% of nurses. Much of this loss was caused by burnout and a desire for greater flexibility. [A study in The Lancet](#) found that half of female U.S. healthcare workers experienced burnout, compared to 42% of men. As women leave the workforce, promotion opportunities are lost, and there is a negative impact on gender parity.

While healthcare is predominately delivered by females, men still hold most leadership jobs. [Modern Healthcare reports](#) that females make up 30% of C-suite positions—with only 13% represented as CEOs. In addition, large gender disparities exist in pay across the board. [Medscape's 2022 Physician Compensation Report](#) found that women are paid less than men in both primary care and specialty fields—despite evidence that [female physicians achieve better health outcomes](#) than their male counterparts. The healthcare industry must make sure it is giving the female workforce what they need to succeed, and double down on its efforts of hiring and promoting women into leadership positions.

Women are also critical stakeholders in healthcare for families as they make most of the [healthcare buying decisions](#). One [article suggests](#), “As the health care system gets rebuilt for the post-COVID world, now is the time to shape it from the inside out. In order to deliver health care that is high-quality and cost-effective—and to deliver care that’s truly equitable and inclusive for all Americans—we need to ensure the architects of the new system are diverse and representative of the people they are trying to serve. That means valuing women for their full economic worth: the most valuable customers in our health care system.”

As we near the end of Women's History Month, we must recognize the need to pay attention year-round to the roles women play in healthcare and across all industries. The challenges women face—as well as the gains women have made—must be in focus yearlong if we are to advance the delivery of higher-quality, more equitable care.

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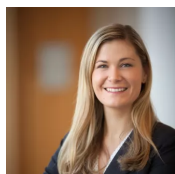
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