The importance of representation

The field of oncology has a gender imbalance, with women only occupying a small number of leadership positions. So how can we improve gender equality in oncology? Dr Pilar Garrido, Dr Anna Sophie Berghoff, Dr Cristina Sessa and colleagues, from the European Society for Medical Oncology’s Women for Oncology (W4O) Committee, are monitoring the representation of female oncologists. Through discussion, education, and collaboration, change can be achieved.

A GENDER GAP IN ONCOLOGY

Many scientific fields have been shown to have a gender imbalance. For example, women are less likely than men to be promoted to a senior position or to be invited as a speaker at a conference. Exploratory research conducted by ESMO also showed this to be true in oncology, and this led the Society to form the ESMO W4O Committee in 2015. While progress has been made over time, it appears to have stalled somewhat in more recent years. The number of women entering the field, however, is increasing, with 47.5% of ESMO members being female according to data as of 31 December 2019.

The ESMO W4O Committee aims to draw attention to these issues and raise awareness of the gender gap in oncology. To begin with, they are sensitising the oncology community to this gender inequality in leadership positions through various studies. This leads to more open conversations which, in turn, can cause change.

Secondly, the initiative brings professionals together to exchange resources and encourage collaborations for female oncologists which can advance careers and lead to new opportunities. Sharing challenges and aspirations allows local initiatives to respond to their members’ specific needs. Finally, W4O sessions at ESMO Congresses allow dissemination of all this information and research. This also provides another opportunity for female oncologists to discuss career development and to meet inspirational women leaders.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FEMALE AUTHORSHIP

W4O investigates the gender imbalance in oncology through studies that focus on the gender gap in career development and by monitoring the progression of female oncologists into positions of leadership. These findings can then be disseminated across countries to raise awareness of this gender inequality.

First, W4O carried out an authorship study to assess the representation of women as authors in oncology. The researchers looked at papers from five major oncology journals covering a period from 2017 to 2019. On each of these papers they checked the gender of the first and last authors listed. It was found that the percentage of female first authors remained similar across all three years, ranging from 37% to 41%. On the other hand, the proportion of female last authors increased over time, from 24% in 2017 to 27% in 2019.

Another discovery from this study was that all senior authors were men, and 40% of first authors were women. This highlights that, despite there being more female researchers, the majority of researchers leading studies are still male.

As well as authorship, gender representation throughout the different sections of these journals was analysed. It was found that women were less likely to be included in the main sections of the journals and more likely to be found in special sections. There are more publications in main sections, therefore it is important to note that women are underrepresented here.

Another discovery from this study was that on average, the h-index was lower for women than for men. The h-index measures an author’s productivity and takes into account the number of citations they have had. It is used to assess the quality of an author’s work. However, if we are seeing lower percentages of women authors than men this will affect the h-index, in turn leading to a vicious cycle.

FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

Another way in which W4O assessed gender equality in oncology was through a study that monitored the representation of women as speakers at oncology congresses, and as board members and presidents of oncology societies. They looked at 180 different international and national conferences from 2015 to 2019 throughout which there were 35,113 speakers. It was found from the data that men were significantly less likely to be represented as speakers compared to women. Information from each of the five years showed that well below half the speakers were women. However,
the percentage of female speakers did increase from year to year. While in 2015 only about 30% of speakers were female, this had increased to roughly 37% by 2019. This is not an enormous difference but shows an upwards trend over the years.

These upward trends of female representation in oncology were seen at international conferences, but only in certain regions at national conferences. For example, conferences in Europe and South America had steadily increasing numbers of female speakers, board members and presidents, but this was much lower or not seen at all in Asia or Oceania. Knowing about these differences could point to an area of focus for outreach in the future.

The gender discourse can inspire young women to pursue a career in oncology.