

Diversifying the Field: Reflections of Female Orthopaedic Residents

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As young female residents, we have begun to build our own perspectives on what it means to be a woman in orthopaedic surgery. Although our program strives to improve diversity and does so quite successfully, we must focus on successful tactics and consider new ideas to increase the number of women in orthopaedics. While there remains a long road ahead, reflecting on the progress we have made helps us understand how we can continue to improve.

In writing this reflection, we had a moment to revisit the programs that helped us get here, along with the influence of the large group of female faculty. One resident had an early interaction with the Perry Initiative, a program named after one of the first American Board of Orthopaedic Surgery certified women, Jacquelin Perry. The Perry Initiative is a program for women in both high school and medical school that aims to inspire more women to enter engineering and orthopaedics. The resident went to a Perry Initiative event during the first year of medical school, and there were over 15 female orthopedic surgeons there from the Texas Medical Center. These surgeons were incredibly excited to discuss orthopaedics, but also discussed how much they love their partners, children, hobbies, and fellow attendings. Seeing young attendings who were relatable and capable of loving their jobs and lives outside of work flipped the script on what this resident had previously heard regarding women in surgery; namely that you must choose between work and family. This continues to be one of the myths surrounding orthopaedics that many female medical students hear regularly.

Just as the female surgeons at the Perry Initiative made orthopaedics seem approachable and achievable, the large number of female faculty in our program do the same. A strong bond forms when a mentor chooses a mentee because they see themselves in that individual. The female attendings have been in our shoes and know how to help us succeed both inside and outside of the operating room (OR). They have countless tips and tricks for approaching struggles, such as physically maneuvering heavy patients, and methods for reductions that use physics and finesse rather than height or muscle mass. They help us become more vocal about what we need to be successful.

Our female attendings remind us that asking for assistance in the OR is not a sign of weakness and give us the confidence to realize that when you are performing surgery, things that help you perform the surgery are non-negotiable. If a resident is in a program without many female faculty members, national organizations such as the Ruth Jackson Orthopedic Society (RJOS) exist to help connect women in orthopaedics nationwide and provide this mentorship. Annual meetings and conferences, grants, and scholarships are all available for female orthopaedic residents in the society and help build the comradery and guidance that is critical to our continued diversification of the field.

Increasing the number of women in our field is a daunting task, even with the backing of the amazing groups of women involved in the Perry Initiative and RJOS. As we reflected on other ways we feel supported in our environment, we began to realize that the small, daily actions of our male colleagues contribute significantly to our feeling of belonging, and therefore our ability to succeed in a male-dominated field.

One resident noted that if a female resident is in a patient room with a male attending, the patient often will refer to her as a nurse. Typically, this is accidental, but small moments like this every day contribute to the feeling that women are outsiders, and that we do not fit the mold of an orthopaedic surgeon. While the attending could ignore it and continue the conversation with the patient regarding the plan of care, a small but polite correction of the patient means more to the resident than the male attending often realizes, and many of our attendings make this brief correction without any hesitation. Similarly, some junior male residents will redirect the patient's questions to the female attending or chief resident with a comment like "ask her the questions, she is my boss," which is more validating than any forced Title IX training module or lecture on the statistics of the wage gap. In our experience, it is these day-to-day comments and responses that reaffirm that women belong here.

The end goal is to normalize women choosing a career in orthopaedic surgery. We have excellent female attendings and national programs to help women gain

access to orthopaedic surgery, and they all deserve our time and support. These programs are what introduced women into the field and continue to bring in more, along with providing mentorship that is relatable and enjoyable. We do not want to overshadow the impact that our male colleagues can have on the field, especially in small moments. Organizations and mentorship bring women to orthopaedics, but the daily support and reminders from those that surround us are what make us feel that we belong here (Figure 1).



Figure 1. *Female Residents of UNM Orthopaedics 2022.*