Among medical specialties, dermatology has attracted a significant number of women, many of whom have attained a high profile. As of 2005, 59.6 percent of dermatology residents were women, up from 51.1 percent in 1995. Obstetrics and gynecology (75.7 percent) and medical genetics (60 percent) were the only fields with a higher proportion of female residents in 2005. While many embrace the status of women in the specialty, some have suggested that the high proportion of women contributes to the workforce shortage in dermatology.

It is within this context that the Women's Dermatologic Society—an organization of women and men—currently advocates for and seeks to preserve the advancement of women in the specialty.

Opportunities for Women

The Women's Dermatologic Society (WDS) was formed in the 1970s “by a core group of women who felt that women were not given the opportunity to present on the podium at major dermatologic meetings,” explains current WDS president Mary Lupo, MD, Clinical Professor of Dermatology at Tulane Medical School in New Orleans. “By working together and networking together as a group,” members sought to, “overcome the barriers of commonplace sexual discrimination at that time,” Dr. Lupo says. She notes that early bias against women seemed not to be “malicious,” but more a reflection of “the way things had been.”

Three decades later, the specialty has progressed. “Women are very well received in dermatology now. We are leaders in dermatology,” Dr. Lupo observes. Nonetheless, she maintains that the society remains relevant and necessary. “The current mission of the Women’s Dermatologic Society has evolved into one of further outreach beyond our individual group.”

Current activities include mentoring residents, offering guidance and direction to medical students interested in dermatology, and providing community outreach services to educate the population about issues such as the importance of seeing dermatologists, sun protection, and early detection of skin cancers, etc. The society’s “Families Play Safe in the Sun” public awareness campaign has provided important sun safety education through events across the country, an educational website, and other venues and has garnered significant media attention.

The organization is not simply by and for women. Roughly 10 percent of WDS members are men, Dr. Lupo says, and they fulfill various roles from...
committee membership to board positions. These male members “recognize the important contributions of women and are supportive of our organization and want to be involved in many of the wonderful programs we have,” she adds.

Not only does the society advocate for issues affecting the specialty in general; it also is active in international issues for dermatology and for women, Dr. Lupo notes. International initiatives include mentoring, study opportunities, and support for educational programs.

Workforce Issues
“One of the issues that’s facing all dermatologists and to a large extent women is the workforce issue and the fact that there’s a great need for dermatologists in the United States and around the world,” Dr. Lupo observes. The Women’s Dermatologic Society is seeking to do its part by educating and mentoring future dermatologists. The society offers mentoring grants that enable medical students to travel to foreign countries and provides grants for international residents to come to the US to study.

Of note, Dr. Lupo highlights what she calls an “interesting fact” about women in the workplace: although data show women do not work as many hours per week as men, women tend to work more years on average than men do. “There are issues with women cutting their practice back to raise families,” Dr. Lupo says, “but they seem to more than make up for it and carry their load.”

Advancing the Specialty
“I think the issues confronting women in dermatology are the issues of all of dermatology,” Dr. Lupo contends. She says these include: access to care, integrity of the specialty, and educating the consumer of medicine that the dermatologist is “the best advocate for their skin medical needs rather than to go to a family practitioner.” But education alone is not enough. “The flip side of that is we need to be available for our patients so that they are not forced to see primary care physicians or allied health personnel that are not physicians,” she adds.

The Future of WDS
While bias against women in dermatology has largely evaporated within the specialty, other issues confront female dermatologists and their male peers. As the proportion of women in dermatology continues to grow, WDS will continue to advocate for female physicians and the specialty in general, Dr. Lupo suggests. “We are continuing to grow and to evolve and continue to be relevant,” she asserts. “As our situation changes, we want to evolve and continue to be relevant not just to female dermatologists but to all dermatologists.”

Women’s Dermatologic Society President Mary Lupo, MD comments on:

• Women as care providers: “A very interesting phenomenon is that women tend to spend more time per patient than men do. This is perhaps associated with women being—as a generality, there are exceptions to every rule—more verbal than men are in many cases and more communicating to patients. It’s a balancing act.”

• Mothers who work: “The biology of women is such that we have children. And I think that women in the workforce have proven that one can have children and mother and be supportive of their family and still be contributing physicians.”

• Diversity in dermatology: “We continue to do quite a bit of networking and mentoring within dermatology. We try to be very inclusive and diverse. One of the strengths of dermatology is the diversity of interests from academic and research to clinical to medical to cosmetic.”

• WDS’s current mission: “Our interests now are to help other younger women dermatologists who are coming behind us to make sure that the strides and improvements we’ve made are maintained. We also now, as somewhat nurturing and motherly human beings, enjoy the outreach programs to the community and the community education events we are able to do on a grassroots level.

“It’s also all about reaching out to each other as women, to each other as dermatologists—to residents, to medical students, to the community—to try to fill a void where we see one exists.”

1. Data accessed online at www.aamc.org: AAMC GMETrack (2005 data); AMA (1995 data)