



Ryan K. Harrison, MD, FAAOS

AAOS Now

Published 11/12/2020 | Ryan K. Harrison, MD, FAAOS

Commentary

Diversity

Sound Off: Men, It's Time to Be Comfortable Giving Up Some Seats at the Table

We live in a country that declared “all men are created equal.” Even at the time of that declaration, it wasn't necessarily true. If you substitute the word “men” for “people,” it still isn't functionally true in our society or profession. Currently, we live in a world where African American people have the police called on them at their homes, offices, and gyms because they don't look like they belong. We work in a world where only a small minority of our colleagues are women and even a smaller minority are Black, Latino, or LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer [or questioning]).

There is a fear among the majority of giving something up. There is a culture that people are clamoring to protect—to say that being an orthopaedic surgeon requires excessive strength, above-average intelligence, and superior test-taking ability. It isn't just about orthopaedic surgery, however. So many things in the sciences are steeped in tradition, enshrouded in some sort of cultural norm, or just stuck inside a “we've always done it this way” mentality. Even if we do see that some people are changing, the change is slow,

which leads to strong feelings from people on the outside looking in that there is no way they would ever be invited.

We have to say it out loud. Orthopaedic surgery in the United States is a largely white male field. There is a growing effort to change, and more underrepresented groups are joining our ranks, but the numbers are still disproportionate compared to the composition of other fields in medicine, current medical school classes, and society as a whole. This has downstream negative effects on the care our specialty is able to provide to patients.

Only 6 percent of practicing orthopaedic surgeons are women, and only 4 percent of orthopaedic surgery residents are African American. Although orthopaedic surgery is an extreme example, it isn't the only example that exists, and it speaks to the issues that underrepresented groups in our society face every single day. A majority (83 percent) of college presidents are white, while just 5 percent are women. Unfortunately, this is the case almost everywhere we look.

It is exceptionally hard for underrepresented groups to believe that they can follow in the footsteps of those who have broken through glass ceilings. Ask a female medical student whether she is interested in going into orthopaedic surgery, and her answer is likely to be that she doesn't want to make the same sacrifices her predecessors made to fit in and be accepted. Or worse, she may recount the horror stories others have told her about their experiences of exploring a possible career in orthopaedic surgery and being explicitly excluded.

Underrepresented groups often choose these difficult paths despite what they see, instead of at the behest of a hero who has come before them.

One group of people can truly effect change—those in power. It's time to lose the mentality that “they are coming to get us and take over.” Instead, we must invite others to join us in the OR and board room and find common ground for mutual benefit. Research has suggested that when a patient sees a physician of a similar ethnicity, outcomes and communication may be improved and utilization of preventive services may increase.

Inviting more women and underrepresented minorities into orthopaedic surgery isn't going to drown out the white men. Instead, with the proper attitude and a willingness to deconstruct the norms, we will all learn from one another as the culture adapts. And, in the end, outcomes will improve for all.

Let's unlock the ivory towers and invite people who don't look like us to come in. Let's prove to them that they belong and then find comfort in mentoring them to take a seat at

the table and become leaders who can recruit and carry on the legacy. Let's give young people from underrepresented groups role models who look like they do. Let's erase the stereotype that one must emulate the majority in order to fit in and be accepted. Let's do it for our society and patients. Perhaps changing the norm in our small world of orthopaedic surgery will spark further change in our society as a whole.

Ryan K. Harrison, MD, FAAOS, is a clinical associate professor of orthopaedic surgery at Indiana University (IU) School of Medicine. He practices at IU North Hospital in Carmel, Ind.

© 1995-2021 by the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. "All Rights Reserved." This website and its contents may not be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission. "American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons" and its associated seal and "American Association of Orthopaedic Surgeons" and its logo are all registered U.S. trademarks and may not be used without written permission.