

HEALTH

Number of female doctors growing in ORs

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and Robert Marchant

GREENWICH — If you go into surgery in most operating rooms around the state, the faces behind the mask will be predominantly male.

Fewer than one-third of all surgeons in Connecticut are female, according to the latest figures from the American Medical Association. Hospitals statewide have launched a number of initiatives to help boost the ranks of women surgeons. There has been progress, but gaps persist.

“Surgery has traditionally been a very male-dominated field,” said Bridgeport Hospital’s chief medical officer, Dr. Michael Ivy, a trauma surgeon.

At Greenwich Hospital, the number of women surgeons has been growing.

Within the past six months, the hospital has hired four more women surgeons, and it is in the process of hiring a fifth. The hospital’s staff also included women working as surgeons in breast surgery, gynecology/oncology, obstetrics and urology.

According to Dr. Spike Lipschutz, the hospital’s chief medical officer, the hospital has recently hired women to perform surgery in podiatry, breast tissue, pediatric orthopedics and pediatric urology. The hospital is hiring a second woman breast surgeon, as well.

“We recruit absent of gender, but obviously encourage inclusion,” said Lipschutz, a senior vice president for medical services. “We’re always eager to have women surgeons, as just one part of our diversity and inclusion. Our entire Yale system — it’s a very important focus for us.”

Greenwich also has a number of woman specialists who do internal procedures, while not being surgeons per se.

“We’re looking for the

The surgical gender gap

Here’s how Connecticut stacks up nationwide, and against a selection of other states, when it comes to the percentage of its surgeons who are women.

Nationwide: 25 percent of surgeons are women

Connecticut: 28 percent

Massachusetts: 33 percent

New York: 28 percent

California: 27 percent

Pennsylvania: 26 percent

New Jersey: 25 percent

Louisiana: 23 percent

Kentucky: 20 percent

Source: American Medical Association
(most recent data is from 2013)

best — quality and performance — and fitting in with our culture of being people-focused. And we find women are particularly good at being focused on the patient,” Lipschutz said.

“We’re always eager to consider women in surgery in particular — they’re culturally a very good fit for Greenwich Hospital.”

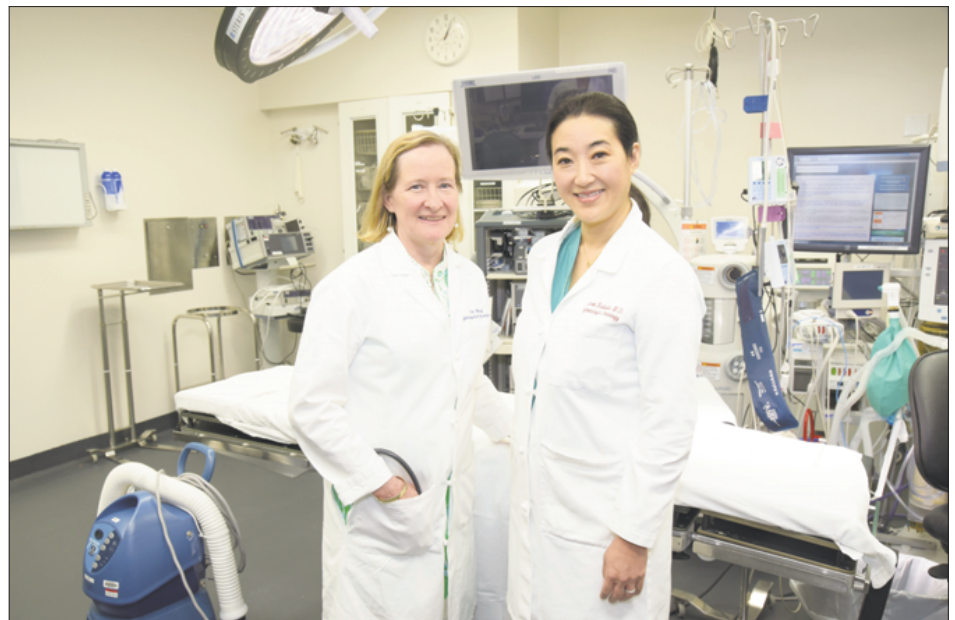
Bridgeport Hospital has taken several steps to add more women to the surgical team, including adding flexible work schedules and hiring more surgeons to ease the on-call burden. But the overall lack of women in the field is something of a vicious cycle, Ivy said.

“People go into a medical field because they have role models, as students and as residents,” he said. “So part of the reason that there aren’t female surgeons is that there aren’t more female surgeons.”

Efforts to woo women

In Connecticut, the percentage of female surgeons grew slightly between 2007 and 2013, from 23 percent to 28 percent. The state’s percentage of female surgeons is slightly above the national average of 25 percent.

Yet, women were under-represented in almost all



Contributed photo

Breast surgeon Barbara Ward, medical director of the Breast Center at Greenwich Hospital, and Karen Nishida, gynecologic oncology surgeon, in the hospital’s operating room.

surgical fields statewide except in obstetrics and gynecology, where they represented a majority — 58 percent. There were no female thoracic surgeons as of 2013, and females comprised 28 percent (10) of colon and rectal surgeons and 8 percent (31) of orthopedic surgeons.

In Connecticut in 2007, there were 575 women surgeons, compared with 1,914 men. In 2013, the most recent AMA data show the number of women surgeons increased to 758, compared with 1,885 men.

In part, Connecticut’s gains in courting women are due to the draw of academic institutions such as the Yale School of Medicine, and teaching relationships such as Stamford Hospital’s partnership with the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. But doctors said what’s also important is hospitals are changing the way they are recruiting and

mentoring women.

At Stamford Hospital, women lead the breast and neurosurgery divisions, and the incoming class of residents is all female.

“At least 50 percent of the medical students we interview are women,” said Dr. Kevin M. Dwyer, vice chairman of the Department of Surgery and director of the hospital’s Surgical Residency Program. Just as important, roughly a third of the hospital’s attending surgical staff and community surgeons are women.

Networking and mentoring are also helping to drive the numbers up. Dr. Linda Barry, an assistant professor in the Department of Surgery at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine in Farmington, founded the Women in Surgery Interest Group at UConn in 2011 to encourage female medical students to take up surgery.

A lot of what Barry does is give students a feel for

the surgical life. Members learn suturing techniques and attend workshops on negotiating and networking. The group has 85 women medical students, of which five chose surgery this year.

“I’m like the fairy godmother,” Barry said.

Barriers persist

Despite this progress, “Women are not promoted at the same rate as men,” said Dr. Anees Chagpar, an associate professor in the Department of Surgery and director of the Breast Center at Smilow Cancer Hospital at Yale New Haven. “The disparity is particularly clear at the full professor level, even for women who are equally, or better, qualified.”

According to the Association of Women Surgeons, women comprise only 8 percent of professors and 13 percent of associate professors in surgery. Studies show women earn less than

men and the gap widens over time.

Even with new incentives and programs, the conflict of family care and career continues to be among the biggest deterrents to women entering surgery.

“There’s a bigger time commitment in surgery, and women tend to think about work-life balance more than men,” said Dr. Patricia Sheiner, chief of transplant medicine at Hartford Hospital.

But the gender gap cannot close soon enough. The Association of American Medical Colleges estimates a shortfall of between 25,200 and 33,200 surgeons by 2025.

“We still haven’t gotten there,” but we’ve come far, Barry said.

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