Gender gap in rheumatology: speaker representation at annual conferences

Adami *et al*'s report of gender disparities in the first authorship of rheumatology guidelines was very interesting to read.¹ The authors highlight a fundamental issue: the existence of a gender gap—that is, proportionately more male than female physicians—within the authorship ranks in rheumatology. We had thought that it would be intriguing to investigate whether this difference permeates at the national conference level as well. Recent studies have quantified the gender gap among speakers at academic conferences in other specialties. The most extensive study of 181 medical conferences held in North America over the course of a decade (2007–2017) found an increase in the proportion of female speakers from 25% to 34% over time, and the under-representation of women to be more marked at surgical compared with medical conferences.²

Our goal was to describe the proportion of female representation among speakers and moderators at the American College of Rheumatology (ACR) meetings in 2017 and 2018. Using the ACR Session Tracker programme for these 2 years, we determined the proportion of women for each speaker or moderator slot. We further categorised by basic versus clinical science presentation and by type of session (premeeting, ACR general session, Association of Rheumatology Health Professionals (AHRP) general session, abstracts, workshop, study group or Meet the Professor).

Overall, the proportion of combined female speakers and moderators was 42.8% in 2017 and 47.0% in 2018. The representation of female speakers increased from 2017 to 2018 by 4.2%, which in a conference of approximately 1100 presenters (total presenters at the 2018 conference) amounts to 46.2 persons. There was a higher proportion of female speakers in

the clinical than in the basic science presentations (mean 45.8% vs 40.5%). By session type, the AHRP sessions had the highest proportion of female representation (mean 65.3%) while Meet the Professor and workshops had the lowest (34.4% and 28.7%, respectively) (figure 1).

We found that the mean overall proportion of female speakers and moderators at ACR meetings in the past 2 years was 44.9%. The ACR had female representation above the mean compared with major North American medical conferences held in 2017. This proportion is also comparable to the estimated US adult rheumatology workforce data from 2015.³ However, there remains a gender gap across most medical specialties in Canada and the USA despite the current gender parity in medical school. Limited numbers of role models, sponsors and mentors may cause and perpetuate the problem. Although the gender gap at recent ACR meetings was narrower as compared with other conferences, we must remain cognizant of its presence and continue to work towards equal representation.

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Figure 1 Proportion of female speakers at ACR, by year and presentation type. ACR, American College of Rheumatology; AHRP, Association of Rheumatology Health Professionals.