

Trustee Insights

GOVERNANCE



Advancing Women's Health Is a Win-Win

Hospitals and health systems play a powerful role in women's health, and trustees have an opportunity to drive real change

BY PRIYA BATHIJA

Consumers are seeking greater value for their health care out-of-pocket costs. Health care professionals across America's hospitals and health systems — physicians, nurses and other caregivers, as well as administrators and trustees — understand and share consumers' concerns and are working hard to make care

more affordable by transforming the way health care is delivered in our communities, particularly for women.

Women make up about half the population and are by far the major consumers of health care in America. Addressing the gaps and shortcomings in women's health can [reduce the time women](#) spend in poor health by almost two-thirds and delay the onset of chronic diseases. Because chronic diseases are major drivers of health care spending in the United States, delaying their onset can [help reduce the need for costly long-term treatments](#), hospitalizations and specialized care.

Enhancing the way care is delivered to women can lead to a win-win scenario for patients, communities and hospitals. Trustees can play a powerful role in driving that change forward by initiating conversations in the boardroom and making women's health an organizational priority.

What Is Women's Health

Women's health is often narrowly equated with reproductive and gynecological care, but it encompasses much more. It is often defined as health conditions that occur only in women, occur more frequently in women or present differently in women.

This framing falls short of defining the full scope of women's health needs. Women's health should span a woman's entire lifetime and encompass both primary and specialty care. Primary care includes preventive care, nutrition, immunization and weight management, while specialty care includes cardiovascular health, cognitive and brain health, autoimmune conditions, oncology, aging and bone health, endocrinology and gynecological, sexual and reproductive health.

These conditions must be addressed comprehensively. For example, connections between pregnancy and cardiovascular health, or between menopause and cardiovascular, bone and cognitive health,

have a real impact on a woman's life.

Some medical conditions occur only in women, such as endometriosis, polycystic ovarian syndrome and cervical cancer. Other diseases like breast cancer, lupus and multiple sclerosis affect women far more often than men. In addition, medical studies often focused only on men, overlooking the impact of sex on disease prevention, diagnosis and treatment. As a result, we don't always understand how medications and therapies affect women.

In addition, workforce shortages threaten access to care for women across multiple specialties. [Recent projections](#) suggest that only six states will have an adequate supply of obstetricians and gynecologists by 2030. At the same time, the nation faces a [projected shortage of up to 86,000 physicians](#) in the coming decade, underscoring the need to strengthen access to primary care and specialty services that support women's health throughout their lives.

Getting Started as a Hospital Trustee

Trustees can help drive improvements in access, outcomes and patient experiences for women. They can be champions of women's health who help educate, eliminate stigma and taboos, and normalize conversations around all aspects of women's health. They can start by learning more about women's health, including understanding what women's health is, why it's essential to focus on the unique needs of women and how certain conditions impact women across their lives.

Women Are Your Most Important Consumer

- Women are **51%** of the population and bring **100%** of future generations into the world.
- Women are health care decision-makers for themselves and their families. They make **80%** of health care decisions.
- Women are the largest consumers of health care, using **10%** more services than men — even when excluding maternity-related care.

Trustees can elevate women's health and inspire new thinking in the boardroom by asking questions such as, "How does this impact women?" From there, trustees can build the case for making women's health a strategic priority.

Trustees can assess opportunities for improvement by seeking feedback from hospital patients, the workforce and the broader community. They can also analyze community, local and hospital data to identify gaps in access and care outcomes and review current services, programs, policies and benefits. Tools such as Nyoo Health's free [Women's Health Readiness Assessment](#) can support these efforts.

Combining this data with an analysis of existing resources, preferences, financial forecasts and partnerships will allow trustees to identify and navigate the most effective approaches for the organization. This work should evolve as feedback, data, resources, preferences, financial forecasts and partnerships change over time.

Trustees also must acknowledge that hospitals cannot meet every identified need or do this work on their own. Trustees can ensure that solutions are co-designed or co-created with patients and community partners and that organizations collaborate to utilize limited community resources effectively and efficiently.

Lastly, trustees must identify goals and metrics that will be used to track progress and measure overall success. Establishing metrics tied to improving access, outcomes and/or patient experiences in the short and long term is an important component to this work.

Strategies to Improve Women's Health

Hospitals are improving women's health in a variety of ways — big and small. Below are examples of efforts organizations can take to improve women's health for patients, communities and the workforce.

- **Educate patients.** Provide patients with trusted information during visits and through the organization's website on conditions unique to women's health.

- **Educate communities.** Host community events, in person or virtually, to educate people on women's health topics such as menopause, weight management, breast health, heart disease and more.

- **Ask patients what they want.** Create opportunities for patients to provide feedback on services they want, experiences they have had or education topics they'd like addressed. This can be done through surveys, town halls or

patient and family advisory councils.

- **Improve access.** Consider in-person and virtual care opportunities that help women access physical, behavioral and specialty care — for example, care for women during perimenopause and menopause.

- **Consider how hospitals, working with community partners and local organizations, can help connect patients to resources that address non-clinical needs affecting health outcomes.** These needs may include access to nutritious food, reliable transportation, stable housing, childcare or other social supports. For example, maternal health navigators can guide patients through prenatal and postpartum care, provide pregnancy-specific education and connect families to community resources that support these needs.

- **Design workplace policies and benefits that support the health and well-being of women employed by the hospital or health system.** These may include policies that support employees throughout their careers, such as those addressing family building,



TRUSTEE TAKEAWAYS

Boards can ask the following questions to deepen their discussions on this topic:

- What opportunities can we create that will inspire care teams and leadership to think differently about women's health?
- How can we elevate women's health as a strategic priority for the organization?
- What are the demographics of the women our hospital serves, and what gaps exist or challenges do they face?
- What efforts currently exist at our hospital to improve the health of women?
- How are we gathering feedback from patients, community stakeholders, care teams and employees?
- What organizations can we collaborate with to improve women's health?
- How will we measure progress on women's health?

For additional questions, access Nyoo Health's [Discussion Guide](#).

maternal health, behavioral health, menopause, equal pay, workplace flexibility and paid parental leave for both parents.

- **Advance clinical research.** Trustees can encourage research within their hospitals or health systems that examines health conditions affecting women across their lifetimes, including those that present differently in women. They can also support efforts to increase the recruitment and participation of women in existing clinical studies.

Priya Bathija, J.D., MHSA, (pbathija@nyoohealth.org) is founder and CEO of Nyoo Health. She is a Distinguished Practitioner in Residence at The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law and an adjunct professor at Loyola University of Chicago College of Law.

Please note that the views of authors do not always reflect the views of the AHA.