

The Next Generation of Physicians: Embracing Change in our Workforce

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For the first time in the history of medicine, there are four generations in our physician workforce. Generational differences often underlie conflict between colleagues in health care settings, as well as in our medical learning environments. A generation is defined as “a group of individuals, most of whom are the same approximate age, having similar ideas, problems, attitudes, etc.” Each of the generations sees the world through a different lens based on the events that occur at the time the group is coming of age. The diversity of viewpoints can be a substantial strength in defining our new health care system.

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

“Every generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it.”

~ George Orwell

One thing all generations seem to agree on is that their generation has it “right.” The challenge is sorting out what variation can strengthen our workplace and what standards define professionalism. With each new generation come new definitions for work style, collaboration, teams, feedback and perhaps even what we expect for professional behavior

within the fast-paced environment of the medical workplace.

Traditionalists (Born 1925-1945)

The “silent generation” came to age just after World War II. Being raised in this era, they value duty and honor, are patriotic, and they understand the value of a dollar. They have been loyal to their careers and often have spent their entire lifetime at a single institution. They expect respect from others for the years of service they have put in. Traditionalist physicians see medicine as a calling and a full commitment. Medicine is not a job but a lifestyle.

Baby Boomers (Born 1946-1964)

The largest generation in our health care workforce today, Baby Boomers came of age at the time of the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement and the space walk. Baby Boomers are hardworking and competitive. They invented “feedback,” with annual reviews that were summative. Promotion up the ladder depended on putting in long hours and being recognized for it. Hence, they value authority and a hierarchy. They feel leadership opportunity comes from long hours and years of experience. They have been working hard and looking forward to retirement as the time to enjoy life and have often struggled with work/life balance throughout their careers.

Gen X'ers (Born 1965-1980)

The smallest generation in our workplace, Gen X'ers struggle with authority and are often seen as cynical towards organizational leadership. They are self-directed and seek to constantly expand their knowledge and skills. This gener-

ation has been focused on developing better balance with family life and has worked to set some boundaries between work and home. They do not feel that their profession alone defines them.

The Millennials (Born 1981-1999)

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics, by 2015, the Millennials will make up the largest cohort in the general workforce. Also termed the “Echo Boom,” these young adults were raised in the smallest families in U.S. history. Their Baby Boomer parents engaged Millennials in decision-making early, valued their opinions and challenged them to consider “out of the box” thinking. “Trophy kids” were rewarded for participation, so winning was less important than the fun of collaboration and teamwork. Millennials value near constant feedback that celebrates their strengths. Their generation was defined by Sept. 11 and the world’s response to terrorism. Hence, they live in the present moment and value meaningful work and time with family and friends.

THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION IN THE FUTURE OF HEALTH CARE

The synergy between the Millennials becoming the largest cohort in our physician workforce with the patient-centered medical home emerging as the beacon model is serendipitous. The Millennials will bring skills that uniquely suit this future in health care. Millennials function well within an egalitarian team approach that embraces diversity and collaboration. This generation is native to technology and will greatly enhance our accessibility, communication and medical records. As we look forward to systems of patient registries and practice quality measures, the millennial generation will embrace this feedback for constant improvement through collaboration without defensiveness or competition. Millennials are committed to leaving the world a better place than they found it. This socially-minded passion for medicine will change our health care landscape and our world. Do not expect the Millennial generation to wait their turn to lead; they will be leading early and often on many different fronts.

THE GENERATIONAL DIVERSITY OF THE PHYSICIAN WORKFORCE

The physician workforce should celebrate the strengths of its generational diversity. The Traditionalists bring a dedication to our calling as physicians and our institutions. Their experience and patience provides a wealth of problem-solving wisdom. The Baby Boomers are hard workers who are preparing to leave a positive legacy. They believe in the development of the health care system to serve patients and

communities through quality care and are eager to provide new physicians with the skills necessary to continue this work. The Gen X’ers are self-directed and natural innovators. They embrace new systems and quality improvement. They have high standards and don’t back down from challenges. The Millennials bring confidence from growing up in child-centered families, which provides them with a willingness to lead, innovate and challenge the status quo.

Despite the differences in approach and viewpoint, the core professional attributes of physicians remain the same. Physicians are caring and altruistic team players, value honesty and integrity, strive for excellence and accept the duty to serve. With respect for the strengths of each generation, we will succeed at the collective vision to reform the health care system and provide the U.S. population with a physician workforce that embraces these core professional attributes and the privilege that comes with the physician role.

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