Objective: Although females currently comprise over 50% of incoming medical students, they continue to be underrepresented in certain medical subspecialties—specifically in the surgical field. To assess this gender discrepancy, we designed a retrospective study to assess patients’ perception of physician competency, stratifying based on gender, subspecialty, and post-graduate training.

Methods: From October 3, 2012 to June 6, 2013, surveys were given at two academic medical centers to patients who were stable, cognitively aware, and indicated English as their primary language. Analyses were performed using the IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 25. For univariate analyses, a Mann-Whitney U test was performed. Prior to running the statistics, we specified an alpha level of 0.05 for statistical significance.

Results: Across all departments, there was no statistically significant difference between patients’ perception of male and female residents of the same year in overall communication skills, medical expertise, and quality of medical care. However, female residents outperformed their male counterparts on specific questions evaluating the communication of treatment plans, patient education, and patient satisfaction (p<0.001, p=0.03, p=0.04, respectively).

Unsurprisingly, patients’ perceptions of residents’ overall communication skills, medical expertise, and quality of medical care significantly improved when comparing more experienced residents to newer residents.

Conclusion: An analysis of 4,222 collected surveys indicates:
- Patients ranked female residents as better at specific tasks such as communicating plans, responding to patients’ requests and questions, and educating patients and family members.
- However, we saw no difference between patient perceptions of overall communication, medical expertise, and quality of care between genders when aggregating all specialties.
- In head and neck surgery, women were rated as having better medical expertise and quality of care; in neurology, women were viewed as better communicators; and in orthopedic surgery, male residents were rated as having better medical expertise.

Discussion:
- Tsugawa et al. reports female physicians had lower 30-day mortality and readmission rates for patients compared to their male counterparts.
- Uneven gender distributions evident in various medical departments show relevance in examining why women are not on the whole perceived as providing better care even though exhibiting better communication skills and better medical care to their patients.
- Further systemic reforms are required to facilitate and support women in pursuing their fields without any restrictions imposed by latent gender norms in the current system.