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Is There a Doctor in the Book?

A Study of Female Physicians in Literature

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Introduction

In order to make becoming a physician more equitable, representation of female physicians needs to be implemented more broadly in real life, film, media, T.V., and literature. This study focuses on the lack of representation of female physicians in literature.

Research Questions:

What examples of representation of female physicians in literature are there? And how does representation or the lack thereof affect aspiring physicians?

This project is in compliance with USU's Policy 584: Protection of Human Participants in Research.



Methods

To understand how depiction of physicians may have inspired current pre-med students or practicing physicians, surveys and interviews were conducted.

1. Survey
 - Survey was sent to 150 students; 22 responded (14.5% response rate).
 - Participants were asked 31 questions (multiple choice and open ended).
2. Interviews
 - Participants were asked 9 open response questions.
3. Content Analysis
 - Out of the 73 books listed on Wikipedia's list of fictional doctors only 2 featured female physicians

Results

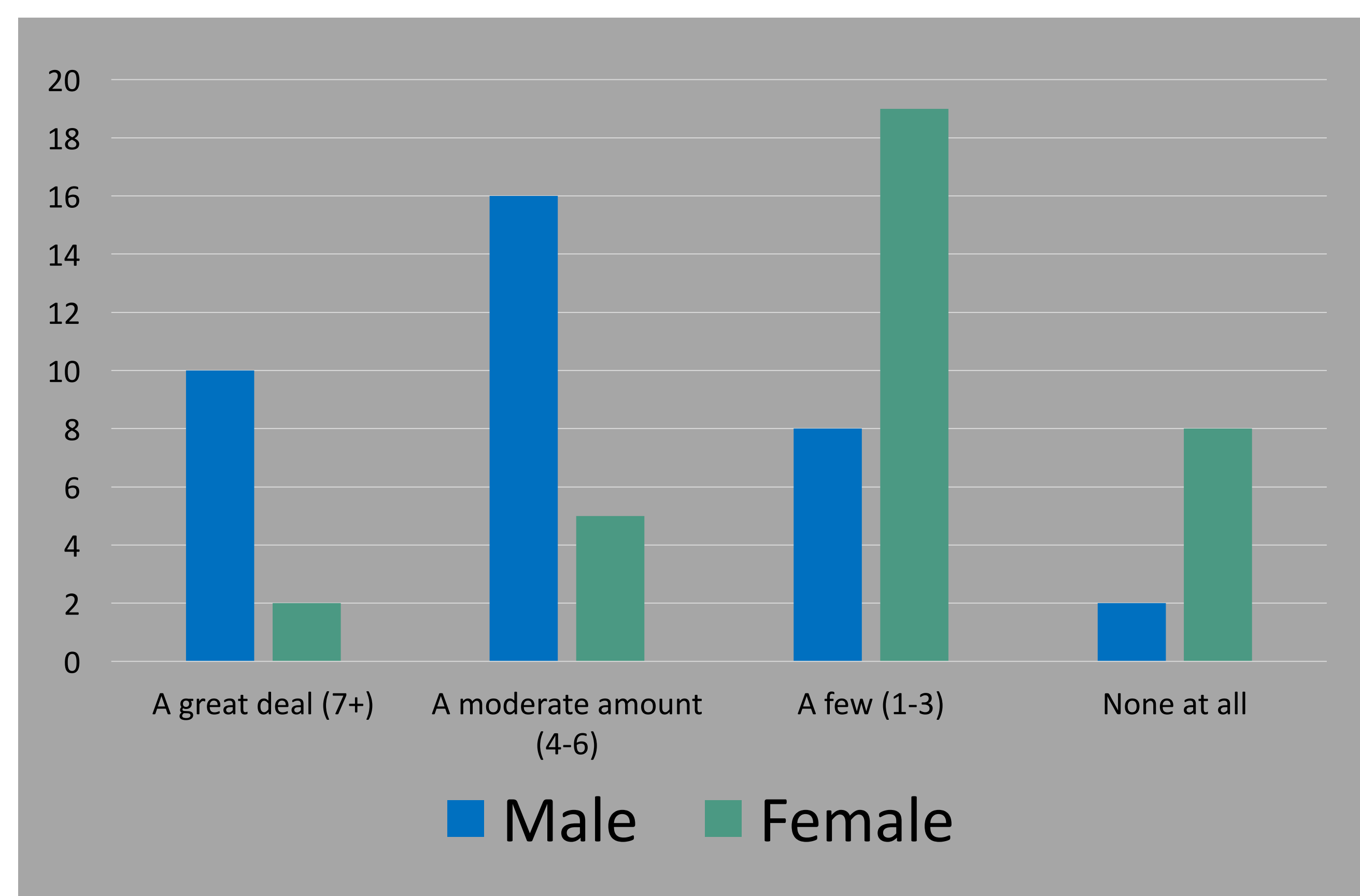
Survey

- 47% of the respondents said they are inspired by fictional characters; 48% are inspired by historical figures.
- 52% of the respondents said they were inspired by non-fiction works to become physicians.
- 94% felt it was important for young female physicians to have representation in literature.
- 82% said they agreed that having accessible role models was important for young girls' future career choices.

Interview

- None of the respondents could name an influential female from literature
- "it shows that I had a bias or pre-existing gender roles that I never thought to stop and wonder where women (fictional and real) were in medicine"

Figure 1 – Enumeration of male vs. female physicians recognized in literature according to the survey.



This graphic illustrates the amount of male and female physicians the survey respondents encountered in all forms of literature.

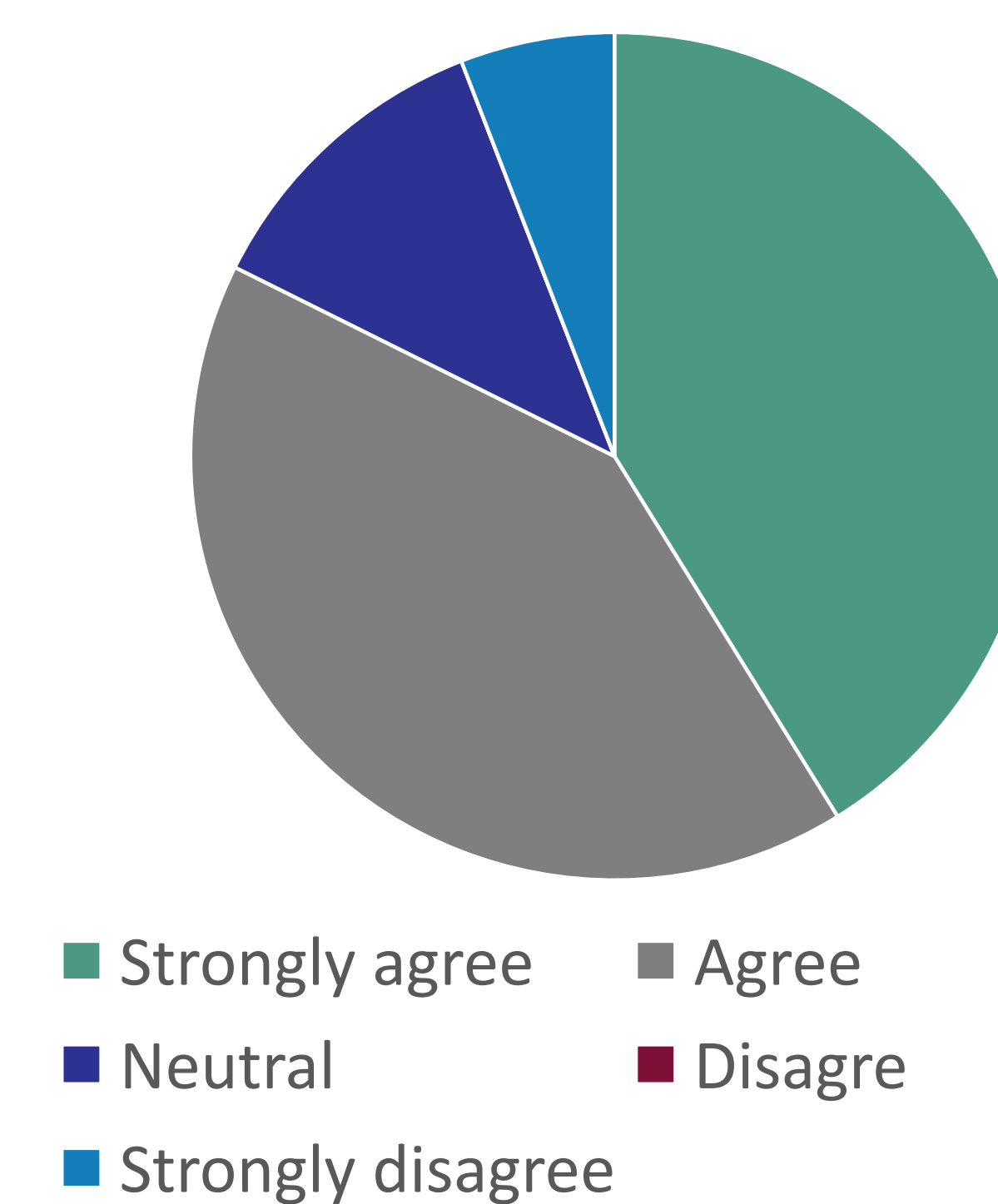
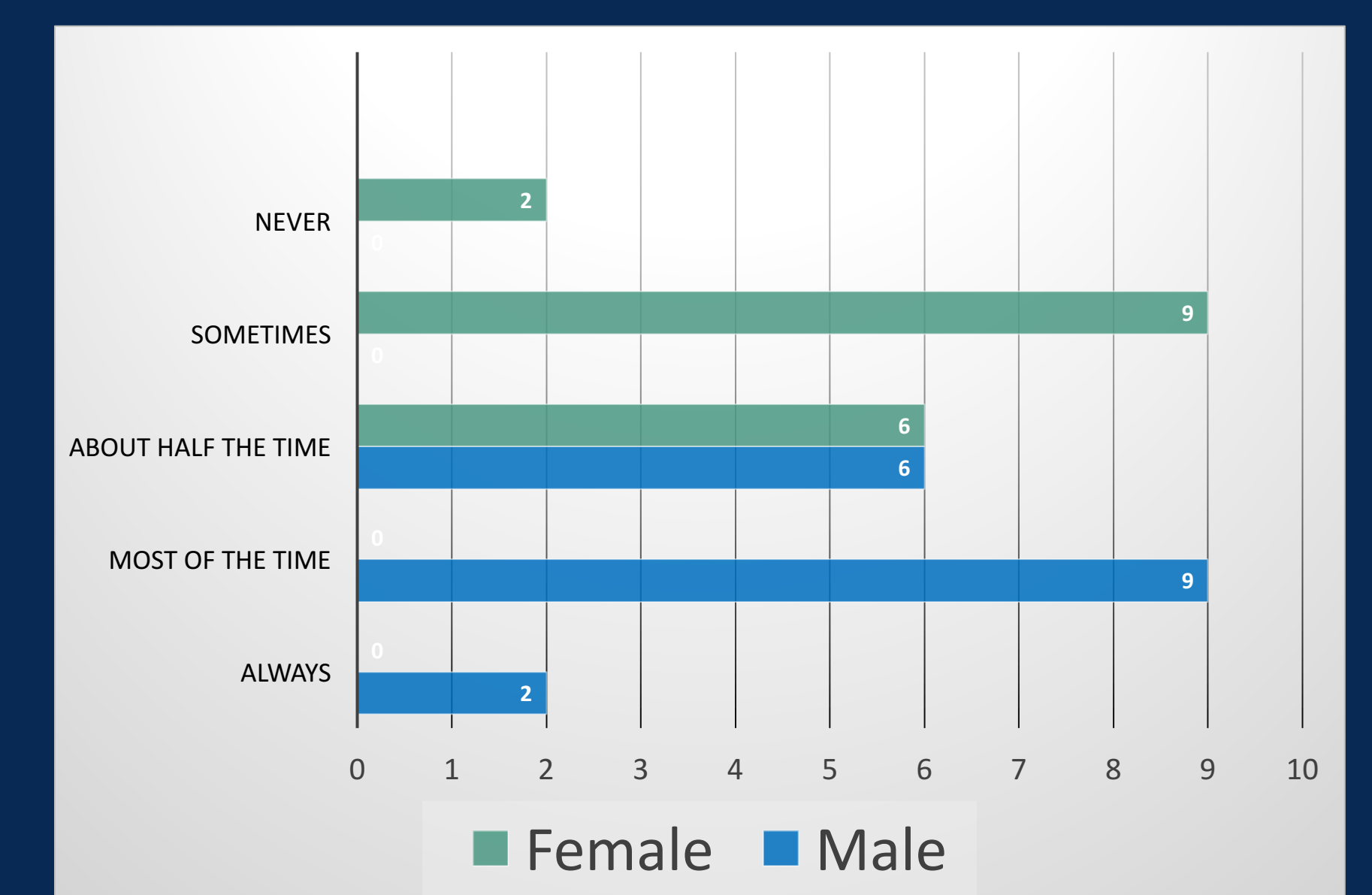


Figure 2 – Survey responses to “Do you agree that having accessible role models in literature affects the career choices of young girls?”

Figure 3 – “How often do you associate the title “surgeon” with a male or female?”



This graphic illustrates the gender biases that are a common barrier for women trying to enter the medical field.

Conclusions

Female physicians are not well represented in literature.

- The mostly likely female physician encountered is Madam Poppy Pomfrey in the Harry Potter fantasy series.
- Representation affects career choices of young girls.
- Increased depiction of female physicians in literature as well as media and real life are important to effect change.

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