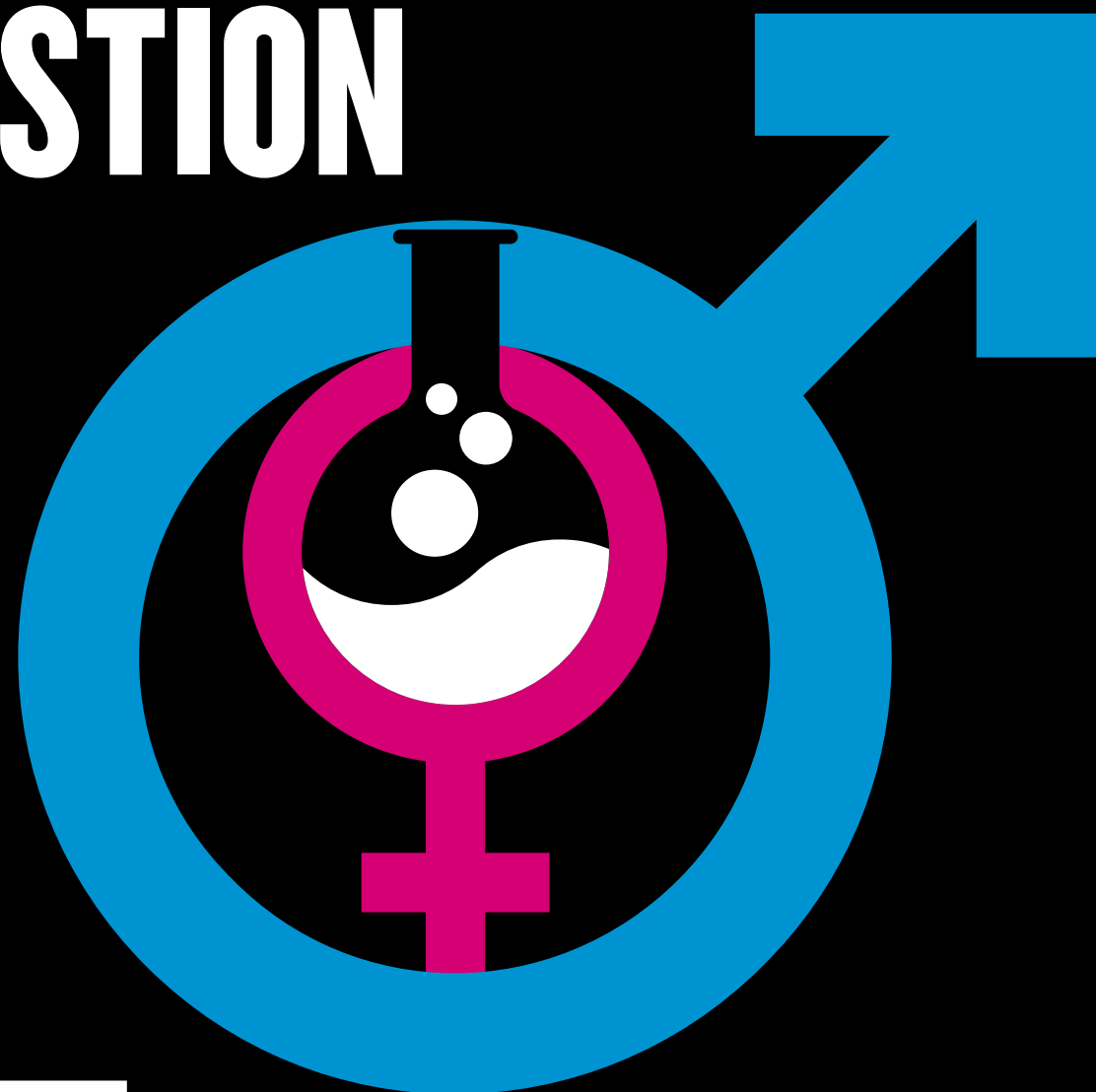


THE BIG QUESTION



THIS MONTH WE ASK

“Is there gender equality in biomedical science laboratories?”



Joanne Motte

Advanced Practitioner in
Histological Dissection
Gloucestershire Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Absolutely, I think that gender equality is well represented within biomedical science. Currently, this is a predominantly “female profession” – females represent 65% of biomedical scientists. My laboratory alone demonstrates this with a ratio of three females to every one male scientist.

With Agenda for Change, a drive towards flexible working hours and shared parental leave, more women are finding successful employment in laboratories. I believe it is a profession where career advancement is now based on experience and attaining further qualifications, rather than gender.

What must also be considered, however, are the historic setbacks relating to maternity leave and changing working patterns, with many women opting to return to work part-time in order to achieve a work-family balance. This may be reflected in the data showing that three-quarters of IBMS students, associates, licentiates and members are women, but the figure drops quite significantly to 56% at fellow level.

The global movement for gender equality has not incorporated the proposition of genders besides women and men, or gender identities outside of the gender binary. I would like to think our profession is open to all genders and gender designations. This is an exciting time and I am looking forward to seeing how we continue to equally shape our workforce and profession.



Colin Mudd

Higher Specialist Biomedical Scientist
Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust

My experience is yes. Of course, there are still areas for improvement and there will probably always be cases of discrimination whilst we have human beings in our laboratories. That, of course, is not to justify or understand it. Perhaps only artificial intelligence will eradicate it completely.

Nearly 42 years ago when I began my career, things were somewhat different. Attitudes thankfully have changed considerably since then. In the 70s and 80s, there were lots of women in working in laboratories but very few were in senior management positions.

I carry out many registration and specialist portfolio verifications around the country and the story today seems quite different. Anecdotally, I see as many women as men in senior managerial positions. My observation also is that women seem to dominate the role of Training Officer/Manager.

The diversity we find in biomedical scientists today is refreshing to see. Having been given over 150 lab tours during my visits to many hospitals, I see so many diverse people, and feel honoured to work in such an environment.

With gender fluidity and non-binary issues at the core of the gender debate these days I do wonder, however, how accepting we all actually are of such differences. Perhaps the answer lies in the hands of the younger generation of biomedical scientists, who tend to be more accepting, more questioning than perhaps those of us of an older generation.



Sheelagh Heugh

Head of Student Experience and Academic
Outcomes, School of Human Sciences
London Metropolitan University

There is still a gender equality gap amongst the biomedical scientists. There are more women biomedical scientists, but there is a predominance of males in higher grades, and where women are in the higher grades, they are paid less than their counterparts. Historically, differences were attributed to the flexibility biomedical scientist work gave working mothers, but the change in lab shift patterns has resulted in more parity of hours worked. The number of women in science has increased, but there still remains a predominance of males in higher positions with higher pay packets, but the gap closes steadily.



FURTHER READING

Knowing Her Place: Positioning Women in Science
By Bevan V. Gatrell C.
(Cheltenham UK, 2017,
Edward Elgar Publishing)

This highly topical book aims to investigate the barriers and influences confining women to “operational/lower level management”. The main premise is a series of structured interviews between the authors, in particular Bevan, and volunteers from the healthcare setting who were known to the author. The interviews are detailed and provide a fascinating overview of the perceptions of male and female biomedical scientists and colleagues in the workplace and in the home environment.

Joyce Anne Overfield