

# Damsels in Distress: An Exposé

By Cheng Su Lin

“I feel discriminated against because of my sex, and note, I’m a MALE,” ranted one irate medical student in response to a survey we conducted for our community medicine project.

After some very discreet enquiries (as the informants feared repercussions for “betraying the Brotherhood”), I realised that this is not an isolated opinion. A number of my male classmates feel that “the fairer sex” gets a better deal when it comes to clinicals, the reasoning being that girls are granted “privileges” – ranging from less scolding to better grades – simply for looking like cute (but ultimately clueless) furry animals blinded by the headlights of an oncoming SBS bus. Um... well, the politically correct response to that would be: depending on whether the stars were in alignment, which magazine’s horoscope one chose to read on the morning of the test, and most importantly, one’s ability to impersonate a stunned hamster, *hypothetically*, such a situation could arise. Though of course, as with all hypothetical situations, the tendon tapper of fate could just as easily swing the other way, or not be swayed in any direction at all.

However, I thought the oddest thing about this whole issue, rather than the alleged “better treatment” that female students got, was the idea that this status quo was a desirable one. From what I know, my predecessors campaigned hard for the cap on the number of incoming female students to be lifted, and it was just over a year ago that this quota was finally removed. Before this, legend has it that it was virtually impossible for a female to enter medical school if she had more than one letter of the alphabet on her ‘A’ Levels certificate, or a testimonial that wasn’t worthy of being displayed in the living room. In view of this, wouldn’t it have been ironic for women to work so long to level the playing field, yet on the other

hand, expect the traditional concessions that come with being the “weaker” sex? With equal opportunities and privileges come equal responsibilities. Taking a more practical example, it may be harder for a girl to test muscle power during a neurological assessment. Many times to my great dismay, I find that even if the patient is down to a power of 4/5, he would still be able to send me flying right out the window. However, I don’t think it’s any less essential that I learn how to do a good physical examination, even if I must resort to carrying 5kg weights in my laboratory coat pockets.

As a student – one of the lower and as yet undifferentiated life forms in the medical world – we take whatever comes our way. I couldn’t say with absolute conviction that I have never been, perhaps not so much discriminated against, but rather, stigmatised, as a female. But it is heartening to know that though the world is imperfect, changes are taking place all the time. Just recently, we had a bedside tutorial on how to reduce a Colles’ fracture when our tutor turned to one of the girls who happened to be standing next to the patient, and asked her to help apply counter-traction. All the guys assumed that it would be better for one of them to take over, but our tutor replied: “Can *lah*. Next time, you can be a female orthopaedic surgeon!”

Hopefully, this damsel in distress theory will be put to rest soon. Because I’d much rather forgo the tempting advantages of being pampered like a fragile porcelain doll, and instead be viewed as an equal and challenged to excel. Equality is much more than statistical numbers. Someday, I hope that it will come to include the recognition that anyone is capable of overcoming the inevitable gender differences and shortcomings, if only they put their mind to it. ■

#### **About the author:**

Cheng Su Lin is a fourth year medical student in the National University of Singapore. She hopes that she can someday attain consultant-hood, and an FRCS (A&E). Failing that, she may consider a career as a stunt hamster on the Discovery Channel. Talent scouts can email her at [liss\\_ed@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:liss_ed@yahoo.co.uk)