

Speaking as a Woman Doctor

By Dr Chow Wan Cheng

When asked to write an essay on women, this is some of what C.J. Jung, one of the great philosophers, said: "So long as a woman lives the life of the past she can never come into conflict with history. But no sooner does she begin to deviate, however slightly, from a cultural trend that has dominated the past then she encounters the full weight of historical inertia, and this unexpected shock may injure her, perhaps fatally... no one can make history who is not willing to risk everything for it, to carry the experiment with his own life... and to declare that his life is not a continuation of the past, but a new beginning... Mere continuation can be left to the animals, but inauguration is the prerogative of man, the one thing that he can boast of that lifts him above the beasts."

This is not the first time that I have been asked to comment on my experience as a female doctor. And yet each time, I never fail to feel at a loss for words, and fear that I may disappoint the editor, for I never seem to be able to grasp the real issue of concern to the editor. This is probably because in the day-to-day practice of my profession, I never consciously think of my gender and its relevance to my profession, if there is any, and quite simply consider myself a doctor. I never really see the need to contend with the fact that I am who I am!

COOKS AND CHEFS

This is not to say that I am unaware of, or intend to disregard, the presence of some prevailing social ideas, including the predetermined rightful role and place for each man and woman in society, which are considered as "norms" in many people's minds. However, there is also no denying that there has been a continuous paradigm shift in the past century. Many restrictions that were once imposed on women have given way. But just like many things else, there can never be any agreement of what is considered enough between the beneficiaries of any change and the others who are giving in to the change. For the latter group of people, they are always in the process of coming to terms with what was given away, and this, I feel, is a fully understandable human response, independent of gender. And if I have been living in a somewhat oppressed or less than equal environment, I probably have grown accustomed to it so well, for so long, to the point of oblivion. It is like an undiagnosed asthmatic patient who has been going round doing his / her usual task in a somewhat hypoxic state constantly, without realising it until the discovery that he / she could breathe and function better after being given an inhaler of bronchodilator.

In fact, the first time that I took conscious note of the presence of women in the profession was when I was

undergoing my subspecialty training (HMDP) in France. I was helping out in the undergraduate teaching of the medical students in the hospital where I worked. It suddenly occurred to me that there was a disproportionately large number of female medical students in the class. I later confirmed that not only has this indeed been the trend of admission in the medical school in France, it has also been the case in some other countries. The fact that it struck me was obviously related to my experience in Singapore. Accustomed to the low female representation among the undergraduates in the medical school, I had nearly forgotten that our situation was in fact an artificial one, resulting from our national policy of restricted female's admission to the medical school.

However, before I had time to ponder over how I could explain this embarrassing, albeit pragmatic, gender policy of our medical school to my liberal French colleagues, I noted the male dominance among the senior medical staff and specialists in the French medical community! So, is this a situation of "while most women cook, the best chefs are still the men"? In other words, men remain the best practitioners of any trade even if some trades are more frequently carried out by women. Otherwise, we should expect a change in the proportion of female medical specialists in these countries in the years to come, assuming the current male dominance among medical specialists represent an older cohort from another era.

Of course, the above statement has made the assumption that being, or not being, a specialist is a reflection of professional and intellectual superiority, which is not necessarily true. We also have not taken into consideration if there are other prevailing issues that influence career decision-making processes (such as familial consideration as a mother and a wife, social expectation, and so on), and possible presence of discriminating glass ceilings in the work place.

CHOOSING OUR PATHS

Whatever it is, things have certainly changed quite a bit since the days when Jung made his statements. So if we compare the modern women of today with our Victorian sisters, we have certainly been given a lot more societal roles and rights. But was it given for free? I do not think so. Like many things else in life, it comes with a price! And how much bigger a price are we, and the society, willing to pay? The truth is, modern society almost cannot afford not having women in the workforce. And yet, the social structure and system, as well as people's mindset, have not really caught up to cope with women's changing, or additional, roles. Acceptance into new societal roles has not spared women from their conventional roles in their society. And perhaps,



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it is in all likelihood that maternal instinct is nature rather than nurture, spontaneous rather than imposed upon. Thus, whatever rights, which come with duties, that are given to a woman, they are generally an additional task, rather than a replacement of whatever she has been expected to perform as a woman in her society.

So, where does this leave us then? I would say to each her own. The good thing is that there is more than one path for any woman these days, and no one choice is better or worse than the other. We should, however, be aware that we might have to pay a higher price to walk on some. There may, of course, be obstacles which, when present and overcome, can only make one stronger and better. Usually, I feel that it is a more worthwhile expenditure of our time and energy in concentrating on what we can do and contribute maximally in whatever social role we happen to play, rather than wasting our effort in the rhetoric of convincing and justification. If there has been any preconceived, misconstrued idea of the fitness of a woman in performing certain social roles, what is better than action, and patience, to correct such misconception?

I recently went to listen to a lecture given by Prof Long Ying Tai, the first culture minister of Taiwan, who was invited by National Technological University and National Heritage Board to deliver a lecture in Singapore Art Museum. Being a Chinese intellect, who completed her PhD in the United States of America, married a German, and has been living in politically controversial Taiwan and the Western world more than half the time, when asked how she maintained her "Chineseness", which presumably is important to her, her response was most positively inspiring to me. While she has no regret being born Chinese, she feels neither proud nor particularly elated. She is glad that, being a Chinese, she has inherited the key to explore and tap on a very rich and huge cultural resource, but she insisted that she is sure that she would be equally happy if she was born an Indian, Greek or Egyptian to be associated with any of these other cultural heritage. She felt that the fact that many Chinese feel the need to assert their "Chineseness", or boast about the uniqueness of the Chinese culture, is a reaction

to the angst that the Chinese mainlanders and Chinese immigrants experienced over the last 150 years when China was politically inferior in the international arena, and the overseas Chinese were mostly under colonial rule. She personally felt that a healthier way to deal with a collective bitter past is to stand up and ask what and how, as a group, these people can offer to the world now, rather than to ask what the world owed them. This attitude, I feel, is useful not only to the many embittered Chinese, but probably applicable to at least half of the population on this earth.

FOR THE GOOD OF HUMANITY

In any case, the presence of differences is not always bad. The difficulty is our tendency to assign superiority and inferiority whenever we encounter differences, which may well be just qualitative in nature. I believe most people will agree that men and women are far from equal, if equality means sameness. However, I feel that it is precisely such differences that give us each a niche for existence on this earth, and probably, in the medical profession as well. The longer I practise medicine, the more I realise the importance of the softer aspect of the clinical practice – what is called the "art" of the practice. While it may not take too much of intelligence to learn about the anatomy, and what can go wrong with the body, in our fellow men (and women), we do not need a medical text book (is there not a book that points out the different planets the two genders are residing in?) to tell us the complexities involved in understanding the minds and emotions of the two opposing genders, and thus the differences in reaction to the same event. Hence, if treating illnesses is more than taking care of the ailing body, a certain degree of empathy by an understanding doctor, who shares similar social experiences and mind certainly helps beyond what a scalpel or a pharmaceutical agent can do for a patient. Thus, as long as there are men and women on this earth, I guess there is a job for every male and female doctor! Beyond which, the prerequisites of doing a good job out of doctoring should be quite universal: whether it entails being a good clinician, a good listener, a good teacher, and even a good scientist. To be able to show compassion and express humanitarian concerns is just being human. Trail-blazed by Florence Nightingale and Mother Theresa, I do not think we have too much difficulty in convincing the world that women possess such qualities.

Finally, the editor has originally wanted me to talk about my work and interest outside the profession. After much pondering, I decided that my interest in Art, and my volunteering at the Art Museum and the Children's Home are really not something worth screaming about, and really quite gender-independent. I can easily think of many male colleagues who are more accomplished in their pursuit of Art as an interest, and others who have volunteered just as much time, if not more, in social work.

And maybe, THIS is the point. At the end of the day, after going round in one big circle, it is all about us working together to make this world a better place for everyone! ■

