

Medicine Women – Pride and Prejudice

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

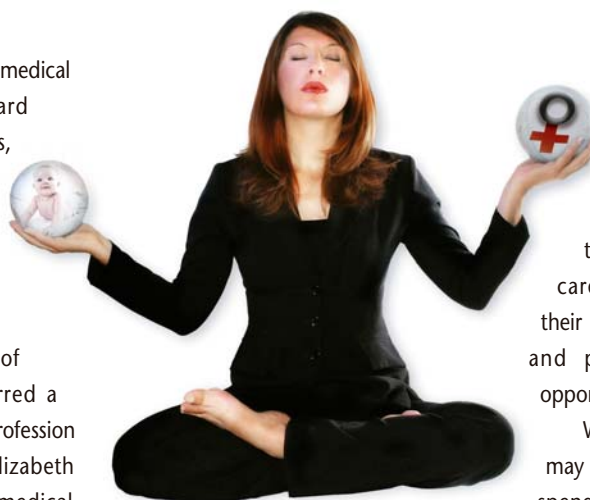
One cannot imagine medical school, King Edward VII hostel, hospitals, polyclinics, GP clinics and operating theatres without female medical students and female doctors. Yet, before Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman of modern times to be conferred a medical degree, the medical profession was largely a men's club. Elizabeth Blackwell was admitted to medical school in New York when the then presiding selection body was at a loss as to whether to accept her, and the task was left to the all-male student body, who thought it would be a laugh to have a female medical student. She graduated top of her class in 1849.

FEMINISATION OF MEDICINE?

The Singapore medical school quota restricting the number of female medical students to one third of the class since 1979 has been lifted in the new millennium. The economic rationale that underpinned this quota was not aimed at denouncing women as "the weaker sex" but that they had a higher professional attrition rate of 15 to 20% after graduation. The Singapore Association of Women Doctors has since shown that a mere 1% difference separates the drop-out rate between Singapore female and male doctors.

In medical schools from Malaysia, Thailand, to England and Russia, women can now make up to and more than 60% of a medical school class. The pendulum has swung. There is some concern that if more flexi-time and family-friendly work practices are not in place in the British National Health Service (NHS), there may be many more NHS women doctors working part-time in the future. In the UK graduating medical class of 1977, almost half the female doctors are working part-time 18 years after graduating.

In the 3 August 2004 edition of the *Daily Telegraph*, Professor Carol Black, President of the Royal College of Physicians, expressed that a domination of the medical profession by women will mean a weakening of power and influence for the profession, and advocated a more equal balance of both male and female doctors. One of the reasons for Professor Black's pronouncement is that the many crucial roles a woman plays may dilute her career-centric focus. The unique struggle to juggle a complex career and family especially for women doctors with children



is a real one. The Olympian hurdles of getting to and through medical school and beyond may leave some women feeling let down if they give up some or all of their career to look after children. Yet their freedom to choose is paramount and providing that equal career opportunity is necessary.

Women who read this article may ask: "Hey, what about the father spending more time at home?" The child guidance handbook would say, parent, male and female, should cherish time with their children. But careers provide temptingly better recognition as a sign of success than parenthood and child-rearing. One of my good friends is a free-spirited couple where the husband, a qualified non-practising medical doctor and one of the brightest intellects of his generation, spends most of his waking hours looking after the children, and his wife works as the main breadwinner. But this is the exception. From the longhouses deep in the primeval jungles of 7th Division Sarawak up the Balleh river, to the cosmopolitan concrete-and-neon jungles of Tokyo, Hong Kong and Singapore, the hunter-gatherers are mainly male, with the stronger Neanderthal instinct to flex physical or financial muscle, and the testosterone to kill that extra wild boar or make that stock market killing on a bull run. The womenfolk see a sacred duty in looking after the children and the elderly, and tending to the collection of the day.

MORE THAN A WOMAN

Do women bring something even more unique to the medical profession? Yes, according to a 2002 *Journal of the American Medical Association* meta-analysis, which shows that women primary care physicians are better patient-centred, emotionally-connecting communicators than their male colleagues, and spend more time with their patients. The intuitive touchy-feely side of the healing profession is surely more feminine. So a metrosexual like David Beckham with his melting Donald Duck voice may have made a wonderful paediatrician. That is, if he is not too busy hitting on the neonatal ICU nurses.

Another survey reports that the career aspirations of female and male doctors are very similar. A 2000 *New England Journal of Medicine* study reveals that women are more likely than men to pursue careers in academic

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medicine, but that there may be some disparity in their ability to advance in their academic career track. Women doctors have proven that they can stand side by side with their male colleagues through 100-hour work weeks, resuscitate gasping patients in the grim hours of the morning, cut open abdomens to fix broken bits, take *tekan-ning* from seniors in high intensity medical situations and *tahan* the explosive pressures of a profession where getting splattered by human piss, pus, poo, puke and pong is a badge of honour.

That is why I have heard more than one parent say that they would rather their daughter not study medicine. Why not marry Auntie Chin Chuey Lui's son, who is a toilet bowl exporter going regional to China (therefore a supreme hunter-gatherer) and just be a *tai tai*? Marry male doctor also useless, they struggle so hard for so little these days. Why go through the nightmare reality show of getting through medical school with the highest examination re-sit rates in University (*Amazing Race*); become a sleep-deprived zombie house officer after that (*Survivor*); fight for a basic specialist training position (*The Apprentice*); take exam after exam with a high chance of elimination (*Fear Factor*); go through some hellish ivory tower examination like the MMed where even after you have sung: "I think this is a mid-diastolic murmur with a presystolic accentuation!", you can still get canned by *ngiao* judges looking for perfect pitch (*Singapore Idol*); and finally fighting your way through promotion after promotion to reach some mythical pinnacle of ecstasy (*The Bachelor*), all because you were top girl in RGS and won second prize (and not the first prize, which was won by a geeky RI boy. That's why you are so hungry and hate men) on *Singapore's Brainiest Kids*.

But the fact is, more girls today worldwide are applying to medical school. One successful lady corporate lawyer recently sighed that if she were to do it all over again, she would have become a doctor, do something fulfilling for people, have a better lifestyle as a locum and see her kids more, and not have to work until 11 every night beholden to big clients and super-tight deadlines.

NO WOMAN NO CRY

Gender discrimination in the medical profession over a century ago has very much receded. In the 19th century, male doctors regarded menstruation to be a form of temporary insanity, making women less than suitable to practise medicine. For most doctors today, gender in medicine is not even an issue to be conscious of. Let there not be female against male doctor discrimination either. Women doctors have been through medical fire and rain with equal equanimity as their male colleagues, and can somehow remain less unshaven and have legible handwriting at the end of a night call. Never mind that the night nurses cooked instant noodles with fish balls for the male houseman and conveniently forgot you.

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Also, we can live with a few catty dramas stereotypically more common with women doctors. Meow.

The unique qualities of men and women make the medical profession and patient care all the more enriched for it. A famous local female litigation lawyer once opined that men were very simple – give them a TV plus remote control, a can of beer and a babe, and they would be contented. She added that women were more complex, fascinating, multi-layered and textured. While I beg to differ on her over-simplistic definition of men (and it should have been babes, not a babe), the TV plus remote part drives uncannily home.

As I read through today's popular press, I begin to see the diverse dilemmas and concerns facing modern women in the 21st century. These eye-popping magazine cover headlines include:

"I was a woman, now I'm a father."

"Real life: My marriage lasted 6 hours."

"How I stole my husband back from his mainland Chinese lover."

"How to tell he's trying to say, 'I love you.'"

"Does he need to attend 'Man Obedience School?'"

"I stripped-danced for my hubby, now he's my slave for life!"

"When your maid has a lover. Spot the danger signs."

"Raise a Gifted Kid. Experts share what really works."

These are only from the popular women's magazines, and not even the main news media. It only gets worse there.

Indeed, the medical world would be a poorer place without the spirit, strength, smarts, sensitivity and scent of a woman in the healthcare profession. ■