

# Women in Medicine: The Next Wave

By Dr Oh Jen Jen, Guest Editor

When Han Chong asked me to helm this inaugural theme issue, I accepted it as both an honour and a great opportunity. However, anxiety soon kicked in, as concerns about Gloria Steinem-esque feminist rantings flashed through my mind. Would our featured writers' sentiments be misconstrued as lashing out, thus reinforcing prior notions that females "always have something to prove"?

Allow me to use the following example. In a memorable episode of the reality TV series *Fear Factor*, host Joe Rogan shakes the winner's hand after the prerequisite triplet of physically demanding, stomach-churning and death-defying stunts, spouting the now-famous congratulatory line: "Evidently, fear is not a factor for you."

What made this memorable, though, was the winner – a beautiful, petite brunette, sans bulging muscles and in-your-face attitude. Throughout the rigorous competition, she remained calm and focused, smiling sweetly and speaking barely above a whisper. As expected, quite a few of her opponents underestimated her initially. It was not until the end of the second round that one alpha-male-beefcake confided that he thought she was "a tough cookie", even grinning in admiration when he was fairly defeated in the final stunt.

**"Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacity."**

This was actually spoken by a man – specifically, Mohandas Gandhi. It is often said: "All men are created equal", but women were somehow often overlooked, either educationally or socially. It was not until only a few decades ago that the fairer sex began to enjoy privileges that were once solely offered to our male counterparts. But these advances came with their own excess baggage – discontent and hostility from the men, suspicious fear from unenlightened females, and the usual unflattering labels and stereotyping.

The path of a woman doctor sometimes follows the same route, though much less traumatically compared to the Caveman Era of yore. In the local setting, where Asian conservatism and deeply ingrained notions about gender roles prevail to this day, it is encouraging to witness the positive changes that continue to be effected in the healthcare system and society at large.

**"If you want anything said, ask a man.  
If you want something done, ask a woman."**

– Margaret Thatcher

Back in 1994, when I started my first year of medical school, there were only 38 females in a cohort of 150. Ten years

later, women comprise more than 50% of the class. And to be honest, I never once thought this would be possible. At least not in this lifetime.

That is just one illustration of the relatively invisible but highly influential driving force, which emanates from the work of a significant number of motivated women doctors in Singapore. Ranging from junior physicians to consultants to a Member of Parliament, they represent the best and the brightest of the profession, bringing a vital mix of female intuition and a gentle touch to a male-dominated arena. Through their tireless efforts, generations of women doctors have reaped significant benefits, as previously closed doors were opened, and oppressive glass ceilings shattered.

**"Men, their rights, and nothing more;  
women, their rights, and nothing less."**

– Susan B. Anthony

The following articles – generously contributed by a colourful group of female medical professionals – are personal perspectives on the subject of "Women In Medicine", and run the gamut from bemused to indignant, analytical to passionate. Reading each author's thoughts, I was struck by both their inherent similarities and overt differences. Yet, despite it all, one theme permeates throughout: a common wish for equal career opportunities, greater support for mothers juggling family life and demanding careers, and acceptance (if not admiration) from our male colleagues.

To me, *Fear Factor* is the mirror image of a woman doctor's life, with its immense challenges, occasional prejudices, and intermittent self-doubt. But like that spunky brunette, we take everything in our stride and do our best to rise to the occasion, facing even the most formidable obstacles head-on.

At present, certain preconceptions still exist, and bias, like the proverbial ink stain, may sometimes seem impossible to eradicate. However, I remain optimistic about the future, and believe that one day, the playing field will indeed be levelled.

Last but not least, I leave you with this tongue-in-cheek statement. Let it be both a constant reminder and an inspiration. And try watching *Fear Factor* sometime!

**"Whatever women do they must do twice  
as well as men to be thought half as good.  
Luckily, this is not difficult."**

– Charlotte Whitton ■



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