

Women Doctors in Thailand

By Prof Somsri Pausawasdi

BACK TO THE PAST

The history of medicine in Thailand began during the period of King Rama V, when doctors from the western countries arrived in the kingdom. In 1888⁽¹⁾, the first hospital in Thailand, Siriraj Hospital, was established. Medical education was offered in 1890, but only male applicants were accepted. It was only in 1925 that an agreement was drawn up to allow women to study medicine. Consequently, there were seven female medical students in the class of 1926. However, the agreement limited the proportion of female medical students to only 25 percent of the class. It was not until 1967⁽²⁾ that the agreement was cancelled because of the education reform, so that anyone who passed the entrance examination was allowed to enroll in the course.

Currently, the ratio of female to male medical students is at 60 (female) to 40 (male). However, the number of male doctors (18,361) is much higher than female doctors (10,238)⁽³⁾. Nevertheless, it is certain that there will be more female than male doctors in the near future.

GROWING PRESENCE

In the beginning, female doctors were more likely to be involved in medical and academic services, but not at management level. This has since changed considerably. Female doctors now hold many important positions, from Head of Department to Dean. More female doctors can also be seen in the medical specialties, except for surgery and orthopaedics. But there is a trend that the numbers for both female general and orthopaedic surgeons are increasing. Moreover, there are female doctors who head medical organisations for obstetrics and gynaecology, paediatrics, anaesthesiology and ophthalmology, but not yet for surgery, internal medicine, orthopaedics, otolaryngology and radiology.

Women doctors do not generally shy away from "heavy specialties" like cardiothoracic and orthopaedic surgery. Rather, they select their specialisation depending on their interest, and also specialties that require less physical strength.

With the change in cultural perceptions, women doctors are becoming a welcome presence in many areas. (Male doctors with whom I spoke with also agree.) People are beginning to place their trust in female doctors. One example is the rise in demand for female obstetricians and gynaecologists in many private hospitals, partly as a result of demand from patients. Many female patients suffering from breast disease also request for female doctors.



Prof Somsri Pausawasdi, President of the Medical Association of Thailand.

HEALTHCARE IN THAILAND

The private and public healthcare systems in Thailand are strong, and both have the potential to grow stronger in the future. To strengthen public healthcare in Thailand, healthcare is one of the three major policies of the current government. The public sector receives support from the government and other organisations, both local and international. The quality and quantity of healthcare in the private sector has been raised significantly because of the increasing number of both local and international patients.

At the present, we have a number of women doctors who assume responsibilities as directors of private hospitals. The present President of the Private Hospital Association in Thailand is a woman doctor too.

THAI WOMEN AS HEALERS

In general, the medical profession requires more analytical skills, thinking processes and diagnostic skills, than physical strength and stamina. These skills can be found in both men and women equally. On the other hand, because motherhood is something unique to female doctors, it may allow them to have a greater sense of caring and patient understanding, especially for female patients. Thus, female doctors can provide more appropriate patient care in some aspects.



An all-female operating team in action.

Moreover, with females outnumbering males in the population, we will see more female patients asking to see a woman doctor. As such, having more women doctors may strengthen the profession in a way.

BALANCING WORK AND FAMILY

Since joining the Department of Anaesthesiology, Ramathibodi Medical School, Mahidol University in 1969, I have dedicated myself to all aspects of the profession such as medical service, teaching, research, administration, and submitting academic articles at both local and international levels. I also practise in the private sector to supplement my government salary.

However, I never neglect to take good care of my family and personal life. Fortunately, my husband and five children are understanding about my work. My husband, Professor Dr Arun Pausawasdi, is a surgeon, and currently the Advisory Chairman of the Ministry of Public Health. As we always work together, he is especially understanding about my job. My fourth child, Dr Nonthalee Pausawasdi is also a doctor. She is currently a Fellow in Gastroenterology at Michigan University.

When we know our duties and manage our time properly, we will be able to achieve balance in our life, including work and family.

LOOKING AHEAD

In the future, the number of female doctors will increase. Already, we have more female than male medical students.

All in all, I believe that as long as we devote ourselves to work and enjoy working, we can make difficult tasks easy and be successful in all our endeavours. ■

REFERENCES

1. Personal communication: The Department of Technology, Faculty of Medicine, Siriraj Hospital: 2004.
2. Personal communication: The Department of Education, Faculty of Medicine, Siriraj Hospital: 2004.
3. Personal communication: The Medical Council of Thailand: 2004.

ABOUT PROF PAUSAWASDI

Prof Somsri Pausawasdi graduated from the Siriraj Medical School in Thailand in 1963.

Prof Somsri is the current, and first, woman President of the Medical Association of Thailand (MAT) since its establishment in 1921. She was also the first woman doctor on the MAT Council when she joined in 1998.

In addition to Prof Somsri’s various contributions to the government, universities and charities, her other appointments include:

- Advisor of Commerce Commissioner, House of Representative
- Council Member, Health Insurance Systems Committee (Control Quality and Standard)
- Vice Chairman, Tri-Party of Medical Organisation, Ministry of Health
- Committee Member, Evaluation for Professorship in Anaesthesiology, Ministry of Education
- President, Board Committee of Continuing Medical Education, Thai Medical Council
- Chairman, Committee to Examine Error in Medical Malpractice, Thai Medical Council
- Advisor and Special Lecturer, Department of Anaesthesiology, Chiangmai University
- Expert, Evaluation for Specialist in Anaesthesiology, Universities of Songklanakarinta, Khonkaen and Mahidol
- President, International Fellowship Programme of Royal College of Anaesthesiologists of Thailand

HIGHLIGHTS OF RECENT ACTIVITIES IN THE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION OF THAILAND (MAT)

- Appointing active young doctors to join the MAT Council.
- Fundraising for MAT’s activities.
- Creating the “medico legal consultancy service” for all doctors.
- Raising the standard of the MAT Journal.
- Strengthening the relationship with leading international medical organisations.
- Setting up the Tri-Party of Medical Organisations, composed of MAT, Medical Council and Public Health Ministry to develop the standard of Thailand’s public healthcare.
- Inviting the President of Women Medical Association of Thailand to join the MAT Council, and several female doctors to be on the Advisory Board.