

Women in Surgery

The female surgeon is a rare entity that has become more commonplace in recent years. And why not? Surgery is not just about brute strength or technical skills. It also demands precision, attention to details and intuition – qualities that the female species may better possess. However, surgery is and will probably continue to be a male-dominated specialty.

Before I entered university, I was advised by a friend (a medical officer at the time) not to study Medicine as it would interfere with my social life. When I was a medical student, he told me yet again that I had made the wrong choice. A few years later, when he discovered that I was a surgical trainee, he repeated the warning again. Armed with much more wisdom now than I had as a greenhorn medical student, I actually agree with him.



Babara R Sommer, the assistant professor and director of Geriatric Psychiatry, Stanford University School, once wrote: "Why are men never asked, 'How will you balance your career and family?'" I remember being posed this same question at my medical school interview, and again when I applied for my Basic Surgical Traineeship. So were many of my fellow female colleagues. Most of us have accepted this as part and parcel of life: people questioning our career choices or doubting our capabilities. However, I am happy to say that none of my patients has ever been uncomfortable with the fact that I am a female surgeon. Maybe they are more enlightened than us medical professionals!

In fact, in certain surgical specialties such as obstetrics, gynaecology and breast surgery, female patients prefer to have women doctors. We also tend to work better as a group, hence the preponderance of females in paediatric surgery. However, even in specialties which do not deal specifically with "female problems", patients may find a woman more sympathetic regarding issues of death and disability.

Previously, when there were fewer of us, we were either ignored or we just learned to adapt to the males. However, as we increased in number, we have become difficult to disregard! Sometimes, I think our male colleagues feel threatened by us rather than vice versa. They have to accommodate us in terms of having us in the same rooms (although I still get chased out by my male colleagues when they need to change), or refraining from speaking in a certain manner in front of us.

Practically, however, surgery is a really tough career for anyone, especially a woman. Take, for example, my colleague

who just recently delivered. She was delayed for many months in terms of training and learning because of her pregnancy, and is now lagging behind her peers. In the highly competitive field of surgery, where there are ten people jostling for one job, she has lost whatever lead she previously had. Surgery demands commitment – total and lifelong. Commitment – to our patients (who may develop complications at any time); to the learning process (which requires time and opportunity); and to our seniors and the master-apprentice relationship. But ultimately, how different are our lives from those of our male counterparts? Regardless of gender, we all have family commitments. And now, more than ever, there is an increasing emphasis towards balancing family with working life.

One way in which I feel females are at a disadvantage is how we are essentially emotional beings. As such, we find it more difficult to take the harsh criticism that inherently comes with the job. We also feel more drained at the end of a day's work – not just physically, but emotionally as well.



In researching this article, I have discovered a number of societies for female surgeons. In America, there is the Association of Women Surgeons, while in Australia, the group is called Women in Surgery. A similar organisation in the UK exists under the auspices of the Royal College of Surgeons of London. In addition, an excellent book titled "This side of doctoring – reflections from women in medicine" by Eliza Lo Chin (published by Oxford University Press) features short writings from various women doctors.

What do I wish for the young women who follow us? More understanding. More role models who can help advise and guide us. And strong support groups like the ones I have formed with my girlfriends.



Would I do surgery again if I had a choice? Recently, I was told by a medical officer that I was in a position that, in his words, "many people would die for." However, I sometimes think that misses the point entirely – that we should feel superior to everyone else because of the difficulties we encountered getting to where we are. Because once that happens, surgery loses its essence and getting the job becomes more about winning battles than about the love of surgery itself. ■

About the author:
A surgeon currently practising in a restructured hospital, she is still trying to work out a balance between work and family life, and defining the role of the woman in surgery.