A Lifelong Balancing Act
Dr Anette S Jacobsen

“There is no occupation concerned with the management of social affairs which belongs either to women or to men, as such... and every occupation is open to both.”
– Plato, The Republic, about 390 BC

To call me a Viking with “wanderlust” would sum it up – a fairly fearless female who can’t sit still. I came to Singapore in 1985, having travelled for almost ten years prior. I had no idea then that I would enjoy motherhood and a paediatric surgical career. It all happened in a sort of continued blur during my first five years here. Four kids and two postgraduate exams later, I decided that paediatric surgery would be the ultimate challenge. Earlier on in my life, I had really no idea I loved children so much. Once in Medicine, I always knew I had to be a surgeon rather than a physician, and was quite prepared to put in the extra effort. For me, paediatric surgery has all the requirements of a perfect job with accompanying job satisfaction – and continued challenges.

None of my achievements would have been possible without the continued support from my family. My husband and best friend, Mark, is a very hands-on dad, and a rare one who supported my decision to go away for one year of further training, leaving him alone at home with four children. I think in the end, it brought us closer together, but to date, this must have been the most difficult time in our married life. The kids did not seem to mind so much that mum was away, but our phone bills were substantial, and I was caught crying in the hospital in the UK on a few occasions – one such episode was when my son had fallen and broken his elbow.

“Confucius said: ‘In dealing with the world, there are no definite rules as to how things should be done. A gentleman simply does things according to the actual situation.’”
– Analects of Confucius

Once back in Singapore, I could enjoy work as a specialist, and another baby. One of my surgical bosses during my training days told me he did not mind me personally, but would not let me work in his unit again as I was always pregnant. Still, pursuing a surgical career in Singapore, I have generally not met with any discrimination. The choices and opportunities have been fairly equally distributed. However, it has been mostly hard work. I think having made a choice to do surgery, it would be unfair...
Damsels in Distress: An Exposé

By Cheng Su Lin

“I feel discriminated against because of my sex, and note, I’m a MALE,” ranted one irate medical student in response to a survey we conducted for our community medicine project.

After some very discreet enquiries (as the informants feared repercussions for “betraying the Brotherhood”), I realised that this is not an isolated opinion. A number of my male classmates feel that “the fairer sex” gets a better deal when it comes to clinicals, the reasoning being that girls are granted “privileges” – ranging from less scolding to better grades – simply for looking like cute (but ultimately clueless) furry animals blinded by the headlights of an oncoming SBS bus. Um... well, the politically correct response to that would be: depending on whether the stars were in alignment, which magazine’s horoscope one chose to read on the morning of the test, and most importantly, one’s ability to impersonate a stunned hamster, hypothetically, such a situation could arise. Though of course, as with all hypothetical situations, the tendon tapper of fate could just as easily swing the other way, or not be swayed in any direction at all.

However, I thought the oddest thing about this whole issue, rather than the alleged “better treatment” that female students got, was the idea that this status quo was a desirable one. From what I know, my predecessors campaigned hard for the cap on the number of incoming female students to be lifted, and it was just over a year ago that this quota was finally removed. Before this, legend has it that it was virtually impossible for a female to enter medical school if she had more than one letter of the alphabet on her ‘A’ Levels certificate, or a testimonial that wasn’t worthy of being displayed in the living room. In view of this, wouldn’t it have been ironic for women to work so long to level the playing field, yet on the other hand, expect the traditional concessions that come with being the “weaker” sex? With equal opportunities and privileges come equal responsibilities. Taking a more practical example, it may be harder for a girl to test muscle power during a neurological assessment. Many times to my great dismay, I find that even if the patient is down to a power of 4/5, he would still be able to send me flying right out the window. However, I don’t think it’s any less essential that I learn how to do a good physical examination, even if I must resort to carrying 5kg weights in my laboratory coat pockets.

As a student – one of the lower and as yet undifferentiated life forms in the medical world – we take whatever comes our way. I couldn’t say with absolute conviction that I have never been, perhaps not so much discriminated against, but rather, stigmatised, as a female. But it is heartening to know that though the world is imperfect, changes are taking place all the time. Just recently, we had a bedside tutorial on how to reduce a Colles’ fracture when our tutor turned to one of the girls who happened to be standing next to the patient, and asked her to help apply counter-traction. All the guys assumed that it would be better for one of them to take over, but our tutor replied: “Can lah. Next time, you can be a female orthopaedic surgeon!”

Hopefully, this damsel in distress theory will be put to rest soon. Because I’d much rather forgo the tempting advantages of being pampered like a fragile porcelain doll, and instead be viewed as an equal and challenged to excel. Equality is much more than statistical numbers.

The pressure to excel. Equality is much more than statistical numbers. It is the idea that anyone is capable of overcoming the inevitable gender differences and shortcomings, if only they put their mind to it.

For each career hurdle, I wait for more free time, which often is not forthcoming. But as my children grow older, I can do my own homework in the evenings rather than help with theirs. It is a continued balancing act between work and family – generally, self will come last. However, I overcome this by “indulging” in some travelling. Regional surgical mission trips serve to recharge my batteries a few times every year.

I try to remind myself of my priorities regularly, and also why I chose to do medicine and surgery in particular. It was all for the patients. I think my career is most rewarding, and would never have chosen to do anything differently given another chance.

“There is no cure for birth and death, save to enjoy the interval.”
– George Santayana, 1863 - 1952