A woman’s place

The first contact with the medical profession that I remember was as a cross-eyed 3-year-old in need of strabismus surgery. My surgeon was Beulah Cushman, M.D. My hazy recollection of her was sharpened recently after reading a full obituary I found through the magic of Google. The picture of her with short, curly hair, trim physique, clear-rimmed glasses and thin smile dredged up memories I didn’t think still existed. Reading the obit, I discovered that she was a giant in her field, authoring dozens of papers and multiple books, including one entitled *Strabismus: Diagnosis and Treatment*, which can still be purchased on Amazon. The obit cited her “extreme kindness and gentle manner” as “great assets in the handling of children.”

I do remember feeling very comforted in her presence. I never thought about her being a woman, and I don’t recall my parents talking about it. Yet she was a rarity in 1951. The growth of women’s medical schools in the late 19th century had faded by the early 20th, and in 1949 only 5.5 percent of entering medical students were women. In 1974, when I graduated from medical school, they still comprised only 20 percent of new M.D.s. When I entered practice in 1977, doctors’ lounges had the air of a men’s club, lacking only the paneled walls and brandy snifters.

The last 30 years could fairly be dubbed the era of the woman in American medicine. Today, most medical school classes are about half female. Many specialties including obstetrics/gynecology and pediatrics are dominated by women. And doctors’ lounges seem much more representative of the American demographic.

This has been no small feat. After female physicians conquered the overt bias restricting their admission into the medical profession in the early 20th century, they still faced the skeptical eyes of existing practitioners and wary patients whose preconceived notions about “who was a doctor” led them to shy away from female practitioners. Today, the complex juggling act of balancing medical practice and family life is a tricky feat distaff physicians frequently perform.

Some female M.D.s have added on leadership roles, piloting medical associations, specialized and general, through the turbulent waters of health care in 2014.

Viewing the accomplishments of Beulah Cushman and some of the physicians featured this month, I can’t fathom the discrimination that once kept women in the home and out of medical schools. One notorious Harvard professor, Edward H. Clarke, proclaimed in 1875 that women seeking advanced education would develop “monstrous brains and puny bodies [and] abnormally weak digestion.” Perhaps similar bizarre theories were at the root of medical societies banning women as members. Women have come a long way and, hopefully, so has the rest of the medical profession.

I’m told that the repair of strabismus, especially 60 years ago, was part art and part science. How well you balance the eye movements determines how well the patient’s vision tracks for the rest of their life. Many times during my eye exams, ophthalmologists have commented on how well my eye movements were corrected and asked “Who was your surgeon?” I answer “Beulah Cushman,” and they nod knowingly. MM

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