Inspirational women in medicine

The headquarters of medical professional bodies are invariably decorated with portraits of eminent historical figures—almost all of them men. Such places can feel alienating to the women who now make up an increasing proportion of their membership. So to enter the UK’s Royal College of Physicians (RCP) in London and find its grand atrium hung with 25 huge, colour photographs of eminent medical women—all still living and extremely active—is a breath of fresh air.

The exhibition, Women in Medicine: A Celebration, was conceived by gastroenterologist Professor Dame Parveen Kumar, President of the Medical Women’s Federation and former President of both the British Medical Association and the Royal Society of Medicine, and Professor Jane Dacre, President of the RCP, to mark the centenary of the Medical Women’s Federation. The founding of the Federation in 1917 was a statement that women had established their rights to train and practise, although many still faced discrimination. Only since the late 20th century have women ascended to positions of leadership in medicine, and many of these leaders in the UK feature in the exhibition. Each of the women posed holding a portrait of a medical woman, no longer living, who has inspired her. The pictures are striking and most were taken by photographer John Chase.

Although 50–60% of medical students and 45% of doctors registered with the UK’s General Medical Council are now women, none of the sitters thinks there are grounds for complacency. “Only 4% of consultants in orthopaedics are women”, says orthopaedic surgeon Miss Clare Marx, who served as the first woman President of the Royal College of Surgeons of England (RCS) from 2014 to 2017. “We still have a pipeline issue in terms of leadership. It’s even more important to present women with evidence that it’s doable.” Marx took up her presidency a century after the first woman, Eleanor Davies-Colley (1874–1934), was admitted to the RCS in 1911. “All of us who follow in her steps realise the importance of that first small step of normalising women in the professions”, she explains in the text that accompanies her photograph.

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One specialty where women are present in larger numbers is psychiatry. Professor Dame Fiona Caldicott was the first woman President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPsych) from 1993 to 1996. She did have a predecessor: Helen Boyle (1869–1957) became President of the Royal Medico Psychological Association in 1939. Working in London asylums in the 1890s, Boyle had been appalled to discover that people in mental distress could obtain treatment only if they were certified insane. She went on to pioneer early treatment.

“A key moment for me”, says Caldicott, “was when I realised that I was the only President of a medical royal college who had done their training part time”. The RCPsych has since developed flexible training pathways that make it easier for trainees to balance the demands of a medical career with family responsibilities. “But while we have succeeded in clinical practice”, she adds, “we have not been nearly as successful in academic medicine”.

Of the 34 medical schools that are members of the UK’s Medical Schools Council (MSC), women lead just six. They include the current (and first female) Chair of the MSC, Professor Jenny Higham, an obstetrician and gynaecologist who is also the first woman Principal of St George’s, University of London. “It’s very depressing the way women fall off [the career ladder]”, she says. “Women do not become the principal investigators, command the same grant resources and run the same groups as men.” Higham’s inspiration is Marie Stopes (1880–1958), who as well as her pioneering work on birth control was one of the first British women to receive a PhD.

Fiona Godlee, the first woman to edit The BMJ, left medicine for journalism. “When I became editor of The BMJ, that [the fact that I was a woman] was the story”, she says. “I would like us to get to the point where we didn’t have to shrivel with amazement when a woman becomes President of the Royal College of Surgeons.” Godlee looked to Sophia Jex-Blake (1840–1912), the first female doctor to practise in Scotland in 1877, for inspiration. “She was very brave, not always popular, did a lot for the medical education of women, and had the courage to realise that this was an inequity that needed to be addressed.”

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Women in Medicine: A Celebration
Royal College of Physicians, London, UK, until Jan 19, 2018
https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/events/women-medicine-celebration
To see all photographs and biographies of featured women see https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/projects/women-medicine

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