

Women take their place in medicine

BY JONATHAN L. STOLZ, M.D.

Recent events underscore the crucial role women now play at multiple levels in American society. History has shown that this high level of influence by women has not always been present. How female physicians in the United States have increased their numbers and impact on the practice of medicine is illustrative of how difficult it has been for women to achieve parity with men in our culture.

Prior to 1849, no American woman had graduated from medical school. This changed that year when Elizabeth Blackwell received her medical degree. By the start of Civil War in 1861, three medical schools solely for women granted degrees. In addition, some for-profit proprietary medical institutions in the post Civil War era became coeducational. Johns Hopkins Medical School helped the cause by admitting a woman to its first class in 1892.

With the women's rights movement in the late 19th and early 20th century, a highly articulate minority of male physicians supported more females in the medical profession. Unfortunately, the voices raised in opposition were more numerous and strident. This generated a marked decline in women interested in pursuing a medical career in the early 20th century.

Different factors — both social and economic — were at work that limited the entrance of women into medicine during most of the 1900s.

At one time, many parents were reluctant and unwilling to spend money on their daughters. They believed that graduate education for women reduced their chances of obtaining a successful marriage.

But likely the most compelling reason was the deliberate efforts by male medical staff faculty and administrators to discourage women students from applying for admission to their schools. For

way too many decades in the 20th century, medicine was still considered and accepted as a masculine domain.

This situation radically changed in the late 1960s when social activists successfully sued public institutions to stop the systemic discrimination against women. Between 1972 and 1980, medical schools almost doubled the number of females admitted from 15 percent to 28 percent. By 2005, the number of women entering medical school nearly equaled the tally for men — a 400 percent increase in 35 years.

These statistics parallel my own family's experience.

In 1969, of the 135 students in my medical school who graduated, only 13 were women. When my youngest daughter was awarded her medical degree 37 years later, 52 percent of her class was female.

Today, women make up more than one-third of all physicians in the United States. In 2017 for the first time ever, women enrolled in all American medical schools outnumbered men.

Gender equality, for those desiring to become doctors in the United States, has been achieved, but in other parts of the world it remains restricted.

While females are now better embodied in the medical profession as a whole, there remains an imbalance within certain fields. They are particularly under-represented in the surgical and procedure-intense specialties. But this, too, will change in time as women continue to increase their pivotal role both in medicine and elsewhere within the American ethos.

Stolz is a retired physician, instructor at the College of William and Mary's Christopher Wren Association, and author of "Medicine from Cave Dwellers to Millennials."