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Women in Medicine: Bringing Gender Issues to the Fore

Jill Waalen, MS, University of Wisconsin Medical School

In the early 1990s a milestone in medicine was reached as the percentage of women accepted into several prominent medical schools for the first time reached 50%. This trend continues, and women now comprise half of the enrollment at more than 20 medical schools across the country. According to a recent survey,¹ women represent 43% of matriculating medical students in the United States.

But what evidence is there of the new era many predicted would result from the infusion of women into the profession? Reviewing the progress of women in medicine—or at times, the lack of it—we find that while the 50% mark was an important barrier to surmount, many advances are still to be made. Although the number of women within the profession has grown steadily over the past 25 years—in 1972, just 9.2% of entering classes were women—progress toward equality has been less steady. Job for job, women physicians have not achieved equal pay or equal position, though the gap may be closing.² Nor has inclusion in medical training meant the end of near exclusion from some areas of medical practice. The litany is familiar; women in great numbers become pediatricians, not surgeons.¹

In this issue of Pulse, we look beyond the familiar data to examine not only the continuing need for change, but also the ongoing changes as more women enter and influence an evolving medical profession. In the first article, Janet Bickel, director of women's programs at the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), explores some of the persistent stereotypes and gender biases that hinder women physicians' advancement within the profession, from their first days as medical students to their establishment in private or academic practice settings. Ms Bickel developed the AAMC monograph *Building a Stronger*

Women's Program to aid medical schools in addressing these issues.³

As the number of women in medicine grows, it is apparent that one of the profound influences they will have is in serving as advocates for improving health care for female patients. The need is glaring. The lack of medical research involving female subjects has become an item of public debate, spurring legislation mandating inclusion of women in clinical trials and initiating a federal Office of Research on Women's Health.

In their article supporting the establishment of a women's health specialty, medical students Ellen Schur and JoDean Nicolette argue that such a specialty would not only provide better health care for women by acknowledging and meeting their unique psychological, social, and medical needs, but would also foster research on medically relevant gender differences to guide changes in practice.

In this issue Pulse is also pleased to present the winner of the third annual John Conley Ethics Essay Contest for Medical Students, which asked contestants to thoughtfully examine the ethical responsibility of physicians when confronted with issues of death and dying. This year's winner is Cynthia M. A. Geppert, a fourth-year student at the University of Texas Medical School at San Antonio and a graduate student at Vanderbilt University's Program in Ethics. Pulse wishes to thank this year's distinguished judges, Stephen Latham, JD, PhD, and Timothy E. Quill, MD, and to acknowledge again the generosity of the John Conley Foundation for Ethics and Philosophy in Medicine.

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