

Women in Medicine: “Be A Winner - Not A Whiner”

It's the International Diagnostic Congress Davos (IDKD) 2018, and I am on my way to a meeting with Prof. Hedvig Hricak, one of the most prominent women in radiology today, to discuss the opportunities and challenges facing women in medicine. As a third-year medical student, caught in the middle of my career planning, getting to pick the brains of a woman who has fought those battles is an exciting opportunity. But before we can even sit down, Prof. Hricak lets me know that, instead of me learning from her, she would like to learn from me. As a 21-year-old medical student, I am not sure what I could possibly offer such a successful and experienced person, who is one of the few people who have--in every sense of the word--‘made it.’ Starting her medical training at the University of Zagreb, she later moved to the United States, where she completed her residency and fellowship at the Mercy Hospital, Pontiac and Henry Ford Hospital, Detroit, in Michigan. She earned her Doctorate of Medical Science (PhD) from the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm and became Professor at the University of California, San Francisco. She later received an honorary doctorate from the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich, the first woman in the history of the university to be given such an honor. Today she is Chairman of the Department of Radiology at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center (MSKCC), Professor of Radiology at the Weill Medical College of Cornell University and Professor at Gerstner Sloan-Kettering Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences in New York. In light of these incredible accomplishments, my hesitation upon her proclamation is hopefully more understandable.

Nevertheless, Prof. Hricak starts our conversation by asking me if I have noticed any differences between myself and my male colleagues at medical school. “Let's start with facts: Do you think there are equal numbers of males and females in your course?” Yes, I think, there might even be a majority of females. We look it up, and as expected in Europe, as well as in the US, there are more women than men enrolled in medical school. “Why, then, are there so many more male than female doctors in leading positions of the medical community?” The question is open ended and obviously demands a multi-factorial answer. I won't answer it in this post; nor did our conversation culminate in a straightforward solution. Even so, Prof. Hricak talked me through a couple of problems we as women face during our careers and what she deems important areas to work on in order to tackle these problems.

The first thing that came to my mind when Prof. Hricak asked me if I saw any differences between the experiences of males and females at med school was how differently I act around patients compared to my male colleagues. Whenever I enter a patient's room, I make a conscious effort to build a sort of armour around myself. Walk with a straight back, head up, make myself appear taller and act confident no matter what. It is something I feel like I need to do to be taken seriously by patients, particularly when asking them if I can perform an invasive task such as taking blood. By comparison, my male colleagues have never encountered these particular difficulties. Is this problem due to my size and my young appearance--to paint a picture, I am barely 160 cm tall and was once asked by a patient if I was sure I wasn't supposed to be in school--or is it indeed a gender issue? I don't know. But what I do know is this: While a male friend of mine, who previously worked as a health care assistant, has been regularly mistaken for a doctor, I have watched a patient stop his young female doctor, who had been running a ward of 15 patients alone for over a week, with these words: “Nurse, could you grab me a new band aid?”

“Yes,” Prof. Hricak confirms, “I have had those experiences myself. Women face a number of challenges to being accepted as physicians, in their early days and also as they progress to higher

levels. It is those perceptions in the environment—as well as within ourselves—that we need to recognize and change.”

One of the challenges women face is the narrow path between having to appear assertive and being perceived as aggressive or arrogant. It is a common problem, and I myself have fallen into the trap of perceiving an impressive young woman recounting her achievements as arrogant. Prof. Hricak agrees, “It is a hard line to walk. And in their eagerness, some women tend to overdo it and come off as trying too hard.”

It’s a problem that carries over into women’s academic careers. Prof. Hricak has observed that sometimes students are more likely to go up to male professors than to female ones. Upon questioning, you may hear an answer that male professors just seem more approachable than female ones. “This is definitely something we (as women) have to work on. Find a balance between approachable and assertive and invest in reaching out and mentoring.” I can see where she is coming from. Male professors have no problem seeming serious while also telling goofy jokes, while successful women can easily come off as intimidating. On the other hand, I always feel incredibly empowered after hearing presentations from successful women. Accomplished women have a sort of “wow factor,” an aura that makes you believe they could do anything. Prof. Hricak shares, “There is a reason for the saying, ‘If you want something done, give it to a woman.’ By the time a woman has worked her way up through the ranks, she has had to prove herself time and again to be accepted—so you know without a doubt that she can and she will accomplish a task.”

Later in life, after these challenges have been mastered or successfully circumvented, there is another choice to make for women: family or career? It is a difficult topic and one we spend a lot of time discussing. It is a great cause of frustration for many of my friends and me that this question still seems to be almost exclusively a problem for women. Very few men plan their careers around their dreams of family, and if they do, they are regarded as special cases. And yet, for young women, this seems to be an almost inescapable question. Prof. Hricak tells me that she does have several female faculty members whose husbands have taken over the commitment of staying at home with the kids or taking a less demanding job with more flexible hours. This, however, seems to be a solution that only works for the minority of cases, and one that will not make all women happy, not to mention most men. It is a shift away from the tradition that having children is the woman’s problem. I ask Prof. Hricak if she feels that having children today is more of a partnership effort than a women’s issue. “It is a partnership,” she agrees “but it will likely always be unequal because you will have motherly instincts.” It is an argument I have heard from many sides. So what is the solution to this never-ending conundrum? “I always say to young women: You can do anything you want in life, but you cannot do all of it at the same time,” Prof. Hricak says. “Everything in life is a choice, and I want every woman to be able to make the choice that works for her and not feel guilty about it.”

We discuss different models: having children very early in life, having them after you have reached a comfortable level in your career, having full-time help, taking time out from your career or having a husband who stays at home. In the end it doesn’t matter. What Prof. Hricak wants is that women make the decision that works for them and that they understand the short- and long-term consequences of their choice. She talks to me about the different types of decision-makers: those who lead and make their wishes a reality, those who consciously let others decide for them, and those who unconsciously let others decide and then ask what has happened. “And those last ones are the complainers. Don’t be a complainer.” So I ask the all-important question: Should there be special considerations for people raising kids? “Yes. But we have to be careful. Equality means

equal and not 'with special considerations.' I believe in equal amounts of work for equal pay and equal promotion." Prof. Hricak tells me about several male staff members who are raising children with their male partners. Those men face the same challenges as women. "So, special accommodations should be offered for raising children, but for both genders." The special accommodations Prof. Hricak advocates include flexibility in working hours, both in terms of amount and timing. "If someone wants to work from 6 am until 3 pm, why shouldn't that be possible?" With respect to academia, she also supports the ability to postpone promotion, allowing a longer time period until the next step in one's career.

And after all of this, there is one big problem remaining, says Prof. Hricak. Women need to get better at networking. "Because networking is what helps us do and be better." Networking can help us change perceptions, it can help us go further in our careers and it help us support each other. There is one particular picture that has stuck in my head since our conversation: "Networking comes naturally to men. They go out for a beer after work, or they go to a baseball game—and what do women do after work? They go home because they've got so much to do." Getting better at networking and leadership: these are the big goals Prof. Hricak has set for women and ones she is personally trying to make happen.

What have I learned from my conversation with Prof. Hricak? Never be afraid to make the choice that works for you, and start networking now. "In the end," Prof. Hricak concludes, "it is a combination of yourself and the environment. A good analogy is epigenetics. The Kelly twins have the same genome, but, going into space, one of them entered a completely different environment, and when he returned, his gene expression differed from that of his twin. The environment is responsible for more than we realize--so it's time to change it."

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