

## BOOK REVIEW

# Women and medicine

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Eliza Lo Chin (ed). *This side of doctoring: reflections from women in medicine*. New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002. \$ 29.99, pp 394.

This book is an anthology of stories, poems, essays and quotations interwoven like a quilt to capture the essence of being 'a woman and a doctor' in America. It tries to reflect the sentiments of more than 140 contributors, who besides being women doctors are also daughters, wives, mothers, teachers, students and community leaders—each role demanding a fair degree of skill and expertise.

Medical literature and stories about doctors have remained predominantly male-centric. Written sensitively and from the heart, there are a variety of contributions in this book that reflect the trials, tribulations, delight and distress that women physicians in America faced and continue to face.

Eliza Lo Chin (the editor) begins with a historical perspective on how women who have been caregivers and healers for a long time began their formal foray into medical institutions in the nineteenth century, in the face of hostility, rejection and societal disapproval. She charts the progress to today, when more and more women are entering the realms of medicine—a recent American Medical Association (AMA) report states that for the first time women applicants (50.8%) outnumbered men in applying to US medical schools in the 2003–2004 academic year, signifying a milestone.

Eliza strikes a cautious note though, when she highlights a recent study among female physicians, which quotes a surprising 31% respondents as saying they might not choose the same career path again. Predictors influencing this decision included high work stress, history of harassment, increased family responsibilities and lack of job autonomy. In today's rapidly changing world, this book attempts to portray how women balance a tiring and demanding profession with the pressures of family life.

In the section on early pioneers, letters, writings and memoirs have been dug up to sketch an understanding of how the first women doctors were trained and practised

their graduation from 'chivalry and off Colour jokes to acceptance and respect'. The lack of facilities for women doctors on duty in hospitals and they being forced to use the nurses' rooms by male superiors was one of the many impediments on a daily basis.

In the section on Formative Years, the allure and challenges of the medical education system are discussed. This section 'Life in the Trenches' deals with the period of internship and residency with 36-hour duties and how many contributors juggled additional responsibilities of a fresh marriage, motherhood or both. 'Doctoring' highlights the varied hues of a doctor–patient relationship while 'Mothering and Doctoring' deals with the pain and guilt which many women physicians feel when they cannot devote adequate time to their young children, tired and flustered with work pressures as they are. This leads to often 'Making Choices', where some physicians describe lost opportunities and painful personal decisions such as not having children, to devote themselves to their profession.

'Barriers' presents the hurdles that women have to face, when they try to enter the traditional male specialties such as orthopaedic surgery. Challenges of being in administrative positions—the 'Boys Clubs', and of being from racial and ethnic minorities for women are portrayed. Sexual harassment and the issues of freedom of sexual orientation are laid threadbare through sharing of vignettes from their lives.

The next two chapters deal with how relationships are influenced by the 'doctor' role of these women and how they have to maintain a balance in many situations. In the last couple of chapters families share their views on how they look up to these women and reflections by contributors about their medical careers.

Overall, this experiential sharing is honest and direct, revealing the various facets of the personalities and lives of these extraordinary medical professionals. It would be worthwhile if a similar exercise was attempted in India to portray the lives of women in medicine; the addition of a historical perspective would help in the understanding.