



Letter to the Editor

Women and the Practice of Medicine

A recent issue of On Friday carried this item:

"Of the 2,664 practicing members and non-members in our database (excluding students and retired), 76% are male and 24% female. Of the 347 medical student members, 46% are male and 54% are female. How will these numbers change medicine? What changes have we already seen? Submit your thoughts to SSV Medicine..."

This was one response:

"On Friday," April 11, lists our membership as 76% male and 24% female; among medical students, 46% are male and 54% female. So far so good, those are indisputable facts.

But then comes a clearly prejudicial question: "How will these numbers change medicine?"

The obviously underlying assumption is that they will, for an impartial question would have omitted the initial "How" and would simply have asked: "Will they change?"

The second question goes even further: "What changes have we already seen?"

Again, the assumption is that we have seen changes. Other than the percentage, what evidence do we have to justify such a claim? Why should a mere gender shift change medicine from our hallowed definition as art and science to ... well, to what ?

Here are a few questions which we must answer before we have any basis to talk:

With woman physicians in the majority, will female patients start running to female doctors? If so, male doctors don't know how to listen to women or there would be no such change.

Would women prefer female therapists because "men do only the physical things and only those who don't even know how to do "physicals become psychiatrists"? If so, physicians must erase the ancient demarcation line between body and mind.

As witnesses before the court in adoption cases, will female doctors state preference for homosexual female applicants?

In divorce cases, will they routinely recommend that the children's custody go to the mother?

Ridiculous as it sounds, we cannot answer those questions before we have some statistically valid answers.

Will women get enough sleep if they have to answer night calls, do the cooking and take care of the children? If this is a problem, then their husbands, often physicians themselves,

must learn how to cook and how to change diapers.

Is there a danger that woman doctors might fall in love and run away with one of their patients?

Yes, definitely; but in all probability not nearly as often as some of their male partners of whose habits we read in the daily newspapers.

Will women change the spirit of medical practice? After all I said, let me take off my pseudoscientific mask and give my question a thoroughly unsubstantiated and completely unscientific answer:

Yes, I hope so!

— Herbert Bauer, MD

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