

“I chose the field of pediatrics because I believe that a child who is nurtured from an early age (or even prenatally) has the best chance of achieving a meaningful life and career and achieving or surpassing their goals,”

— Patricia N. Whitley-Williams

*Professor and Chair Department of Pediatrics and Chief of the Division of Allergy, Immunology and Infectious Diseases at UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, and Physician-in-Chief of The Bristol-Myers Squibb Children's Hospital at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital.*



# Reaching for the Stars: Women in Medicine

by Ellen Gilbert • Photography by Andrew Wilkinson

“A lady suffers from a headache, the female physician is called in, and prescribes a new bonnet. . . prescriptions will be made up of new dresses. . . boxes at the opera. . . a party now and then, increased allowances for housekeeping, trips out of town, and the thousand and one other little whims which ladies are constantly ‘dying’ to be indulged in.”

— *New York Times*, October 9, 1854

While disdainful predictions greeted the mere idea of training women as physicians in 1854, women doctors today are a mainstay of the profession. Thanks to changes in legislation (and public perception), significant numbers of women began to be trained as doctors during the first half of the twentieth century.

More recently, the publication, fifty years ago, of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, “the book that pulled the trigger on history,” according to *Future Shock* author Alvin Toffler, is believed by many to have been a catalyst for the second wave of feminism in this country.

Statistics suggest that women doctors (and lawyers, among other professions) still earn less than their male counterparts, and the push-pull dynamic of careers versus family life is more topical than ever (see “The Call of the Child: Why Anne-Marie Slaughter Came Home,” *Princeton Magazine*, October 2012). Four area women who are doctors recently commented on the joys and challenges in their lives.

“Reach for the stars, but have a realistic expectation on the outcome,” 33-year old Shira Goldberg tells young women who aspire to be doctors. “You can successfully advance your career and have a family life at the same time, but you need to employ the art of compromise. It is at times difficult to be the ‘super mom’ and the ‘super doc,’ but it is feasible.”

For Goldberg, family life includes a husband and two young children under the age of five. Professionally, she is affiliated with St. Peter's Hospital in New Brunswick, where she specializes in geriatric medicine. “Geriatrics and Palliative Care has a different focus than most other primary care specialties,” Goldberg notes “We focus on quality of life rather than quantity. With every patient encounter, my ultimate goal is to maintain function for as long as it is feasible.”

Goldberg and her colleagues in geriatrics also often find themselves customizing a patient's treatment plan to incorporate the values and preferences

of the patient and the family. “As a geriatrician, I deal with chronic health management,” Goldberg says.

Patricia N. Whitley-Williams has been practicing pediatric medicine for thirty years. Today, she wears several hats as Professor and Chair, Department of Pediatrics and Chief of the Division of Allergy, Immunology and Infectious Diseases at UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, and as Physician-in-Chief of The Bristol-Myers Squibb Children's Hospital at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. While she reports that she was always “fascinated with microbes” and their “potential to destroy large species,” she also talks about the nurturing aspect of her work. “I chose the field of pediatrics because I believe that a child

who is nurtured from an early age (or even prenatally) has the best chance of achieving a meaningful life and career and achieving or surpassing their goals,” she observes.

“Pediatricians play an important role in not only directly providing health care but also leading the way in disease prevention and advocacy for children and their families.”

Mitra Assadi is Director of Headache Medicine at the new Headache Center at the Institute for Neurosciences at Capital Health, where she also serves as director of Pediatric Neurology. The 48-year-old says that she “chose neurology, and specifically headache medicine and pediatric neurology, because I found them intellectually challenging. The nervous system is the most sophisticated system in the body.

“A systematic and analytical approach,

“Due to my schedule, I am sometimes able to switch things around to make my children's events whether they occur during school or after school,”

— Alicia Brennan

*Medical Director of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) Pediatric Care at the University Medical Center of Princeton at Plainsboro*



which is how I like to approach things, is often needed to diagnose and treat patients dealing with neurological problems. When treating patients with headaches," Assadi notes, "you have to go through a very thorough evaluation process because there are more than 200 different types of headaches, and people respond differently to the various treatment approaches we offer."

Assadi's only child, a daughter, is pursuing a career in genetics, and that is probably not a coincidence. "I told my daughter to get involved in research early on so that she could develop the skills she would need," reports Assadi. "As a result, she worked in a stem cell lab in tenth grade and did clinical research in eleventh, and was well prepared when she went away to college. It's never too early to get involved."

Medical Director of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) Pediatric Care at the University Medical Center of Princeton at Plainsboro, Alicia Brennan, 44, has three daughters, ages 8, 13, and 15, and is Medical Director of the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) Pediatric Care at the University Medical Center of Princeton at Plainsboro. She believes that medicine is a "great" career for women.

"There are so many aspects to medicine that it is possible for each individual to find what works for them. You can be a good doctor and still balance a career and family."

Family considerations are not the only thing that come into play in choosing medicine, Brennan suggests, advising young women "not to rush to go to medical school right after college. Consider taking a year to travel or do something enjoyable as it is another four long years of school after college. One more year does not make a huge difference and there are many sacrifices that you make when you are in medical school. You will never get that time back."

#### HURDLES

Medical school experiences for the doctors, three of whom attended Johns Hopkins Medical School, were somewhat varied.

"The obstacles stemmed from being enrolled in one of the finest medical schools in the country located in Baltimore, a southern city which had recently integrated its hospital wards in the 1960s and was one of the last three medical schools in the south to admit black students – the first in 1963," says Whitley-Williams. "A few professors felt empowered enough to let me know that I did not belong in medical school – always verbalized in the

presence of no one else. A few also felt empowered to belittle and demean black patients in front of medical students and other trainees.

These may have been verbal threats but they only made me more determined to graduate from Johns Hopkins

where I received one of the finest educations."

"There was a lot of competition between the students," Brennan says of her time at Hopkins. She notes though, that the school has since revamped the curriculum, and she has "heard that life there is much better." Assadi concurs. "Just a few of the challenges in medical school included massive amounts of reading, very little time, intense competition among the students, and last, but not least, separating emotions from work."

For Goldberg, who went to Mt. Sinai, a major hurdle was deciding on her specialty. "I found my path by observing the behaviors and personalities of the clinicians in practice," she reports. "I was drawn to the geriatrics and palliative care physicians as mentors whom I wanted to emulate. When I found that spark I knew I had found my calling."

As practicing physicians today, the challenges these women face include, for Whitley-Williams, finding more resources "to help and contribute to the creation of a healthcare system that is affordable and equitable and provides access to all people." While "the art of medicine still exists," it is now "under the constraints of a revenue generating, profit-sharing business." The new Affordable Care Act, she adds, will allow for a higher rate of reimbursing primary care that provides health promotion and disease prevention.

"The challenge of a balance between resources promoting technology in medical practice and resources promoting simple public health interventions remains," Whitley-Williams says. "Technology promotes immediate revenues to the providers and hospitals. Prevention in the long run saves the healthcare system high costs if complications from long standing diseases over a lifetime can be avoided – a result that cannot be measured immediately."

Brennan considers herself "lucky" to be in a salaried job "that doesn't include the stress of running a practice and dealing with insurance reimbursement issues." Running a business can be very time-consuming, she says, she is "glad to have hours in the hospital that I am scheduled to work; When I am done, though, my clinical responsibility is turned over to one of my partners."

Returning to the theme of family, Brennan says that her "real challenges" are maintaining her family life while working full time. "Due to my schedule, I am sometimes able to switch things around to make my children's events whether they occur during school or after school," she reports, "Though, at least once a week I work an overnight shift in the hospital and my family misses having me home. We



"I told my daughter to get involved in research early on so that she could develop the skills she would need," reports Assadi. "As a result, she worked in a stem cell lab in tenth grade and did clinical research in eleventh, and was well prepared when she went away to college. It's never too early to get involved."

– Mitra Assadi

Director of Headache Medicine and the new Headache Center at the Capital Institute for Neurosciences at Capital Health.

"Reach for the stars, but have a realistic expectation on the outcome,"

– Shira Goldberg

St. Peter's Hospital, New Brunswick, specializes in geriatric medicine



have an *au pair* to help with the driving and around the house, but if the kids had a choice, I would be at home all the time. I think they respect what I do but it is hard dealing with the guilt of not always being around."

The country's aging population promises to make this an even greater challenge in the coming years, Goldberg points out. "Initially most people don't understand why an older adult should choose a geriatrician as their primary care physician. Once they experience the coordination of care that I provide, they start to understand why my services are key for the aging population." Older adults who are more frequently hoping to remain in their homes as they grow older and are more frail are a particular challenge. "As I strive to maintain their independence, this issue is an additional strain for both myself and the patient's family and caregivers."

Assadi's first challenge is "doing my best for the patient despite pressure from the insurance companies which limit your attention/time. I sweat over every single patient I see and try to give 150 percent for each and every one." She cites "keeping up with the cutting edge of science," as the second most difficult thing to do. "The amount of literature one has to review and comprehend is significant, and the number of scientific journals pertinent to

neuroscience is approaching one thousand," she reports. Doing research and contributing to the scientific community is third on Assadi's list of priorities. "The challenge is to design scientific research that is practical and cost effective, yet attractive to your peers and also publishable. The key is to build strong collaborations."

#### LOOKING BACK

In retrospect, Whitley-Williams says that she would not change anything, although a stint at the Centers for Disease Control Epidemiologic Service "would have added a dimension to my training." Assadi regrets being less-than-assertive at the beginning of her career. "At my first job, I was easily intimidated in part because I was so young and inexperienced," she observes. "I was also self-conscious because English was not my first language." Although she wishes she'd shown "more confidence" when she started out, Assadi does not believe in steamrolling one's way to the top. "Women who recognize their natural ability to nurture others (younger workers in particular) and possess a gentle yet decisive touch (which can be very persuasive) can provide exceptional leadership," she says. "I don't think that one needs to be aggressive to be a good leader."

What's in a name? A lot, according to Brennan, who decided to keep her maiden name when she got married. "I did that because my father passed away while I was in medical school and I felt it was a tribute to him." Having children made Brennan rethink that choice. "My children have a different last name than me and sometimes people don't make the association," she says wistfully.

Maiden name or not, Brennan vows that she would "definitely" go to medical school again and would "never want to be anything other than a physician. I think I have the best job, and it shows in the passion I give to my work. I hope my children pick a career where they are able to go to work with a smile on their face every day." Given the chance, Goldberg would not do many things differently, either. "All of the experiences throughout my training and clinical practice molded me to be the physician I am today," she says.

"Medicine is a wonderful profession which continues to have an impact on peoples' lives," concludes Whitley-Williams. "It also needs to continue replacing its ranks with bright, creative, innovative and compassionate people who are committed to make a difference in a human life." ■