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A qualified man is hard to find

Friday, May 28, 2010

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Barely four decades after Marcus Welby, M.D. personified the practice of medicine, it's come to this. Recruiters are casting their nets as wide as they can in the hope of attracting a qualified male family physician to coach trainees in the art of the profession. "We're holding out for a guy," says Dr. Perle Feldman, director of the Family Medicine Residency Program at North York General Hospital. Feldman is trying to fill just one of the program's academic teaching positions (of which there are typically four) with a male doctor. Right now, the entire family medicine teaching unit at the Toronto hospital is female, Feldman explains. Not only is the hospital-based teaching staff exclusively female, but the community family practices where the students learn the ropes are all led by female physicians, too, she says.

"It's a big problem," she sighs. "When I was training in the early eighties, there were mostly bearded, avuncular male family doctors." Now, women predominate. Why is this a problem? "It's more balanced, it's more advantageous to have different styles," she says. The team is looking for the best possible contender. "But if it's a choice between two equally good candidates, we'd choose a man."

Exactly the opposite movement is afoot in corporate governance. Women hold just 14% of board seats on Financial Post 500 companies, according to the Catalyst 2009 Census, which

also reported that 45% of publicly held companies had no female directors. The most common explanation for the gender gap is that discrimination is keeping women from top positions—and the most commonly proposed solution is to forcefully even out the numbers via positive discrimination, or through quotas mandating a 50-50 division.

And not just in the boardroom. In the construction industry, for example, the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada has recently proposed that anyone planning to build ought to "employ a gender-based hiring quota as a condition of contract for their builders."

But what if women are deliberately avoiding certain jobs—such as 80-hour-a-week Up in the Air-style corporate gigs, or as welders on construction sites—in order to pursue their interests in other areas? Several surveys of university graduates indicate that the majority of women put a priority on being able to make a difference in their work, and the ability to work flexible hours, which might propel them toward a career in public law, counselling or social work, for example.

Could it be that the institutionalized sexism in our culture is now a less powerful force than the choices freely made by the work force? On one hand, women, largely the higher-achieving sex in the classroom, simply prefer medicine over software engineering or bond trading. On the other, men gravitate toward business and computer science, and away from jobs that require lots of teaching, discussion and "touchy-feely" content, as Feldman has discovered. In short, what if the received wisdom—that equal opportunity for the sexes should automatically create a 50-50 result in every occupation—is just a dated ideal that doesn't take into account people's actual preferences?

In just a few decades, several formerly male professions have become primarily female domains. And this reversed gender gap has engendered another grassroots movement: As women start to populate certain disciplines, they're beginning to redefine the landscape. Meanwhile, they're also voting with their feet to leave areas they've entered, such as the C-suite and law, which are struggling to adjust to women's expectations of greater flexibility, work-life balance and autonomy. The result is a gender-divided professional universe where, contrary to popular belief, men are thin on the ground these days.

The struggle to find a man interested in a prestigious academic position is just one indication of the way the professions in North America are tilting more female every year. It's a marked trend in nearly every field requiring an advanced university degree, but

most extreme in health care. Physiotherapy is 78% female, speech pathology 96%.

In my own field, psychology, there were years when I didn't have a single male student in my graduate seminars (83% of the discipline's doctoral students are female). Medicine is remarkable, though, in that the evolution from male to female continues to gain steam. Between 2004 and 2008, the number of male doctors grew by 3.8%, while the number of females increased by 16.3%, according to the Canadian Institute for Health Information. Some 64% of recent family medicine graduates are now female, a shift that is even more pronounced in specialties such as obstetrics and gynecology, where 82% of the newly minted MDs are women, according to the Canadian Post-MD Education Registry.

Though some policy wonks gripe that fewer male doctors translates into fewer patient hours—men are more likely to be workaholics and less likely to take breaks for children—the public reaction to having more female physicians has been largely positive, if not downright enthusiastic. Women are perceived as better listeners and more empathic. Indeed, the public has come to expect a woman's touch. "The guys face discrimination from the patients," says Perle Feldman. "A lot of patients balk at even talking to a male doctor, won't let him do a pap test."

They may soon find the sheer prospect of a male doctor to be a novelty. When my young son was greeted by the first male pediatrician he'd ever seen, there was an urgent stage whisper betraying his distrust. "Mom! Can men be real doctors?"

They can, apparently. But it's not just the patient experience that is changing, judging by my eavesdropping on a recent Canadian Women's Health Network webinar for female family doctors. "The work environment is going to have to change," says Janet Dollin, one of the webinar's presenters. More female doctors means that part-time options, job-sharing, easier re-entry after a hiatus, and promotions on the basis of merit—not punishing hours—will soon be the talking points of physicians in demand. Women, on average, are less willing to burn themselves out by age 40. This is a mighty good thing, as, based on current forecasts, most of them will be living for at least another 45 years.

Almost any profession that focuses on interaction, or on providing a human service, is now dominated by women. Pharmacy, education, government service, as well as administrative, supervisory and professional positions in business and finance, are all areas that are at least 70% female, according to Statistics Canada figures for 2009. And these trends hold in most industrialized nations. When it comes to occupations that focus on people, on communicating and, increasingly, on administration, management and advocacy, women rule. To wit, the proportion of female law students has increased by 800% since the 1970s, one of the most dramatic occupational shifts of the late 20th century.

The way law is practised hasn't changed much, though. On the contrary, the demands on lawyers have ballooned in recent decades, leaving younger women with the impression that the legal profession is thumbing its nose at its changing demographics. The brutal time demands in private practice, combined with women's commonly voiced ambition to do work that makes a difference—that has a social purpose—has created a segregated profession. The lion's share of female lawyers who stay in the profession veer toward more socially oriented (but also less lucrative) positions in the non-profit sector—in government, the judiciary or universities—while the majority of men remain in law firms or industry, where they climb the corporate ladder.

This meaning-versus-money gender split becomes more exaggerated as careers progress, leaving just a handful of women to choose from for top leadership positions on Bay Street. Meanwhile, there's the often unvoiced suspicion that the "feminization" of a profession is a sign it's being downgraded in the public eye. After all, if "male" is the desirable standard, and more men choose a specialty—such as a career in nuclear medicine, urology or systems engineering—it must have more cachet than what women tend to choose, such as family medicine, pediatrics or pharmacy, right? That's just one question. The more basic one remains: Who's paying attention to the shifting proportions of men and women in the professional world, and should gender even matter?

Decision makers in business and the professions should be sitting up and taking notice, if only because the survey data are clear that the majority of women working in formerly male fields have different interests and priorities than their male predecessors. If we expect them to act like men in drag, we're in for some surprises.

Take veterinarians. In the 1960s, women comprised 10% of the students studying veterinary science. Now 79% of the student population is female—and that means the practice of the profession is shifting according to their preferences. Fifty years ago, most veterinarians looked after large animals that were destined for our plates. Now, 60% of practitioners work only with "companion animals," that is, pets.

Although it's not only women who are driving this shift, Murray Jelinski and his colleagues at the Western College of Veterinary Medicine discovered that the more common desire among female vets to cure animals, not just make sure they make it to the abattoir, plays a significant role. The researchers surveyed recent veterinary graduates and discovered that three characteristics predict who will pursue a food-animal practice: being male, growing up in a rural setting, and having lots of farm experience before going off to college. Interestingly, the researchers conclude that even if colleges know rural men are more likely to go into food-animal practices, cherry-picking them as vet students is discriminatory and contravenes the Canadian Human Rights Act.

One obvious reason why men are becoming scarce in many professions is the exponential increase of women on university campuses all over the industrialized world, not to mention women's stronger academic records, on average. Admission to

Women started to predominate in corporate communications shortly after she began to work in the field in the mid-seventies, Hirst says. "The reasons are many. First, they are generally trained to listen and are good communicators, and two-way communication is the sine qua non of public relations. Second, they moved up through event organization-another thing men were glad to leave to them. And third, they are good negotiators and client relations people. I believe the respect for other groups' interests and opinions, and the ability to negotiate and compromise without controlling the outcome, is the way of the future in all human relationships."

It's not only the way of the future, it's the way of the present. Disciplines that have become primarily female in just two generations, such as veterinary science, and medical specialties like pediatrics, obstetrics and family medicine, are gradually becoming more responsive to the needs of women, especially younger women. Perhaps these women were drawn to those fields for intellectual reasons, or because the work resonated with them in a deep way, but now that they're there in such high numbers, "they're pushing it to be more family-friendly," says Perle Feldman, the academic physician currently attempting to recruit the single (dare I say, token) male doctor to her team. Now that most obstetric trainees are female, "their hours are not a picnic, but they're not as heinous as they used to be," Feldman notes.

Anne-Marie Gosselin, a Montreal emergency room pediatrician with three children under 7, describes a similar pattern. Given that her department at the Montreal Children's Hospital comprises 14 women and six men, there's flexibility about schedules, and an easy-going attitude about pinch-hitting for colleagues-"because it's a philosophical thing" -that's even espoused by the outnumbered male doctors. "Our department has been great. They allow us to work part-time schedules," which amounts to between 20 and 24 hours a week for Gosselin. "If they decided we couldn't work part-time now, they'd lose their staff. And they want to retain us."

One of Gosselin's pediatric colleagues at the hospital added this postscript about the ethics of the matter: Just because a specialty has more women than men doesn't mean people should value it less. "They should be treated equally to other specialties, respected and paid properly," says Dominique Panet-Raymond.

These seem to be the object lessons from the new world of female-dominated professions. Be flexible about re-examining expectations about hours and career paths that were laid down when the work world was mostly male-or be prepared to find new talent. And a field where men are becoming scarce shouldn't lose its lustre. On the contrary, men who want a life might want to apply within.

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