



**In 2024, in preparation for the Celebration of the FMWC 100, the FMWC Ottawa Podcast Committee produced a series of podcasts to celebrate this very special anniversary.**

**This large collaborative project included podcasts telling the history of Women in Medicine in Canada, a podcast featuring each of the Honorary Chairs as well as 2 Podcasts focused on the Past Presidents of the FMWC with their reflections on their year as President and some of the work of the FMWC**

**A podcast was recorded for each of the 3 FMWC 100 Honorary Chairs: "Past Honorary Chair" Dr. May Cohen , "Current Honorary Chair" Dr. Jane Philpott and "Future Honorary Chair", Santana Hernandez. The project also included recording the history of Women in Medicine in Canada over 3 podcasts: Trailblazing Women in Canadian Medicine (1812-1949), Breakthrough in**

## **Leadership (1950-1980), A Women's Health Revolution ( 1970+).**

**The interviews with the FMWC Presidents were done by Justina Melkis and Isabella Churchill. Past President Dr. Bev Johnson, Dr. Shelley Ross, Dr. Kari Smedstat, Dr. Alanna Danilkewich and Dr. Janet Dollin shared their stories and their experiences as Past Presidents. All of these podcasts honoring the 100th Anniversary Celebration of the Federation of Medical Women of Canada can be found on Spotify and Apple Podcasts.**

**<https://open.spotify.com/show/4emyO124WiZTesQa33Dgd8>**

**<https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/fmwc-podcast/id1622303646>**

**Prepared Dr. Bev Johnson**

**Past President FMWC and FMWC Podcast Co-Chair**

The journey towards gender equality in medicine is a testament to the unwavering resolve and pioneering spirit of a select few who dared to challenge the status quo. Dr. Emily Stowe and Dr. Jennie Trout, undeterred by the barriers obstructing women from medical education in late 19th-century Canada, ignited a movement that transcended borders. Their journey, marked by resilience and advocacy, led to the establishment of the first Canadian medical schools for women in the 1880s, heralding a transformative era in healthcare equality (Hacker, 1984). The founding of the Federation of Medical Women of Canada (FMWC) in 1924 further propelled this momentum, as visionary leaders united to champion the welfare and interests of women in medicine. As we delve into the historical tapestry of female physicians' contributions, from the pioneering endeavors of Dr. Charlotte Ross to the advocacy of Dr. Bette Stephenson and beyond, we unveil a narrative of progress and perseverance. From pivotal legal battles to advancements in reproductive rights and healthcare access, the indelible mark of these trailblazers resonates through generations, inspiring a future where inclusivity and equity prevail in the medical field.

In the quest for women's equality in medicine, a small group of determined women paved the way for future generations. Dr. Emily Stowe, the first female Canadian physician, earned her degree in 1867 in the United States since Canadian medical schools had barred women from pursuing medicine. However, through the persistence and advocacy of Dr. Stowe and her colleague, Dr. Jennie Trout, along with changing attitudes, the first Canadian medical schools for women opened in the 1880's in Ontario.

Eventually, in 1924, the Federation of Medical Women of Canada (FMWC) was founded by six pioneering women attending the CMA meeting, Dr. Maude Abbott, Dr. Elizabeth Bagshaw, Dr. Elizabeth Embury, Dr. Janet Hall, Dr. Helen MacMurchy and Dr. Jane Smillie to “promote the welfare and interest of medical women of Canada, and of the Medical Professions and to cooperate with the British Medical Women’s Federation and with similar Federations in other countries having like objects and policy.” The organization grew quickly and within a year, they had 65 chartered members with vice-presidents representing almost every province and territory. Their impact was remarkable, such as advocating for equal opportunities for women physicians during the war. Initially, women doctors in the Canadian Armed Forces held lower ranks and earned less than men until the FMWC intervened. Through dialogue with Brigadier Gorsseline, terms equal to those of male counterparts were secured for women physicians, leading to over 100 enlisting in the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps.

Women bring a unique perspective to medicine that fills a gap in patient care. Dr. Charlotte Ross, the first female physician in Western Canada, exemplified this (Smith, 1975). She practiced in rural Whitemouth, Manitoba, often traveling long distances on horse or sleigh to help her patients, even in harsh winter weather. Despite the challenges, she never turned down a call for assistance and was known for her caring approach. What set her apart was her 'womanly' care – after helping deliver a baby, she would stay to cook, clean, and do laundry for the family. Her ability to address the needs of the patient beyond the narrow medical emergency was a reason that drew people from far away seeking her compassionate treatment.

As Canada moved into the second half of the 20th century, our country began to witness female physicians breaking ground in leadership positions within the medical field. Dr. Bette Stephenson graduated from medical school at the University of Toronto in 1946 and throughout her impressive career in family medicine, she served as the first female president of both the Ontario medical association in 1970 and the Canadian Medical Association in 1974 (Paikin, 2019). Dr. Stephenson moved from her leadership role within medicine to the Ontario provincial legislature in 1975, where she served as Minister of Labour, among several other roles through her time in politics. She was known for her assertive and direct style, her leadership roles, and her tireless advocacy for the role of family physicians in healthcare and reproductive rights (Paikin, 2019).

With female physicians becoming increasingly prominent on Canada's healthcare scene, the 1970s and 80s brought significant advancements in women's health movements. The decriminalization of the oral contraceptive pill in 1969 provided females with unprecedented autonomy over their reproductive health, and awareness around sexually transmitted diseases, sexual violence and safe sex practices grew in the following decades (Liu et al., 2002). That same year, Dr. Henry Morgentaler opened his first illegal abortion clinic in Montreal, and began a fight for the legalization of abortion that would last almost two decades and culminate in the 1988 R. vs. Morgentaler decision. This landmark case made it to the Supreme Court of Canada and struck down the law incriminating abortion, deeming it an infringement on the life liberty and security of persons as dictated by section seven of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (McConnell, 1989).

Central to the ongoing abortion fight were Canadian female physicians, including FMWC past president Dr. May Cohen. While practicing family medicine in Toronto's Bathurst neighborhood, and later as a faculty member at McMaster University, Cohen addressed letters to politicians, broadcasting companies and corporations, enlisting their support of the pro-choice movement. At McMaster, she became a leader in

teaching around sexual health, and advocated for the physician's right to have open and honest conversations about abortions with patients (Dinshaw, 2002).

As the 21st century approached, Canadians witnessed another exciting development; females began to join their male counterparts in equal, and then greater numbers in medical school classes across the country. By 2004, 50.1% of medical students applying to CaRMS were female (1), and females made up at least 45% of medical students in Canadian medical classes (in some schools, women took up to 70% of seats). Despite these advances, it was still evident that there were many specialties lacking female representation, especially in the surgical field, and female physicians began to call for policies like more flexible scheduling and more comprehensive maternity leave benefits in an attempt to make these specialties more appealing to female applicants (Burton and Wong, 2004).

As we celebrate the centenary of the FMWC, we honor the resilience and vision of those who paved the way, while also reflecting on the work that lies ahead. Through commemorations, historical documentation, and spirited discussions, we seek to honor the past, empower the present, and shape a future where women in medicine thrive. Join us in this journey of reflection, celebration, and renewal, as we continue to champion the cause of women's equality in healthcare but also reflect on how we can better support women? The FMWC Ottawa Chapter has been documenting the history, past presidents and honorary chairs of the FMWC. To listen to our podcast, visit [https://linktr.ee/fmwcottawa?lt\\_utm\\_source=lt\\_share\\_link#257373638](https://linktr.ee/fmwcottawa?lt_utm_source=lt_share_link#257373638).

Conflicts of Interest:

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