

Medicine's 'invisible women' problem

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OTTAWA | While almost 40% of doctors in Canada are women, this has not translated into enough female doctors in key leadership roles in academia, medical politics or medical organizations, says Dr. Mamta Gautam.

Dr. Gautam was responding to a [STAT article](#) by Dr. Julie K. Silver, associate chair for strategic initiatives in the department of physical medicine and rehabilitation at Harvard Medical School. Dr. Silver partly attributes the gap between the salaries of male and female physicians and scientists and between their levels of federal funding for research and their academic promotions to the “invisible women” problem. While she says women are represented in all areas of science and health care, they are often not seen or heard.



Dr. Mamta Gautam

She cites the annually published “best healthcare quotes lists” including Becker’s Hospital Review’s *On the record: 50 best healthcare quotes of 2015*. “In the list, which was compiled by a woman, almost three-quarters of the quotes by individuals were from men. Although they were listed ‘in no particular order,’ the top four quotes were from men. A similar list by *Forbes* in ‘The Most Important Healthcare Quotes of 2015,’ included entries from 10 men and two women. Interestingly, the two women were part of a three-person quote that included a man. Thus, no woman was quoted individually with her own voice,” Dr. Silver writes.

Dr. Anne Niec, national president of the Federation of Medical Women of Canada and a professor in the department of pediatrics at McMaster University, says the “invisible women” problem affects public perception. “The importance of invisibility affects public perception of roles, value of opinions and the issues women face,” she said. “In particular, women may be perceived as less able to inspire change. This influences how women must support each other, promote each other and continue to put themselves forward to increase visibility of their opinions, positions and needs.”



Dr. Anne Niec

Dr. Gautam is a psychiatrist who treated physicians for two decades and is now a physician executive coach. She remembers when an annual national conference on general surgery featured a woman on the cover. “There was a big stir about it,” she said. Dr. Gautam also recalls the *Medical Post’s* 2015 list of [30 most powerful doctors](#), which

featured eight women (not including presidents of medical associations). Seven of the 20 “doctors to watch” were women.

“This is done without intention. It is not intended to maintain stereotypes, but this is unfortunately the effect,” she said. “I think the role of media can be very helpful in addressing these issues. To raise awareness and be more aware of some of the nuances of how we promote leadership roles.

“We need to have a multifaceted approach to correct this, helping women gain skills and increasing their level of confidence, and also having male colleagues appreciate what we need and support us more effectively,” said Dr. Gautam, who in addition to delivering leadership courses for female physicians, has given workshops to male physicians on how to support female colleagues. “I have seen some positive changes but I don’t think we are there yet. I am excited to continue trying to get there.”