Stony Brook graduates highlight rise of women in medicine

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Stony Brook University School of Medicine celebrates the 40th anniversary of its first graduating class at the School's 2014 Convocation on May 22, 2014. From left to right: Dr. Lisa Deuel, Dr. Janice Lark Coleman, of the class of 1974, Dr. Annie Darves and R. Owen Pyke. (Credit: Dan Goodrich)

On a rainy Thursday outside Stony Brook University's Staller Center, Dr. Janice Coleman stood chatting with Dr. Annie Darves, both of them resplendent in black gowns and green and blue velvet graduate hoods. A beaming Darves, 27, of Albany, had just graduated from Stony Brook School of Medicine, and Coleman, 64, an obstetrician-gynecologist who grew up in East Elmhurst and lives in Columbia, South Carolina, was on hand for her 40th reunion as one of the first 18 graduates of Stony Brook's then-brand-new medical school.

Much has changed at Stony Brook since those early days for women in...
In 1974, when Coleman finished med school, six of the 18 Stony Brook graduates were women. That was a high ratio at a time when nationally less than 15 percent of medical school graduates were women, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. Forty years later, about 47 percent of med school graduates are female, a statistic mirrored in Darves’ class, where 59 of the 129 graduates are women.

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Yet despite the strides, women remain underrepresented in certain areas of medicine, especially in the surgical specialties, statistics show.

Darves is going to Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in Nashville for a residency in urology -- a field where only 24 percent of urology residents are women. Dr. Aditi Kanth, 25, of Roslyn, who graduated from Stony Brook alongside Darves, is going to Albany Medical College for a residency in plastic surgery, a specialty in which about 29 percent of residents are female.

And women lag in leadership roles, especially in academic medicine. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges, only 14 percent of department chairs are women and 12 percent of medical school deans are women. Even in pediatrics -- a field with more female doctors than male -- only 29 percent of full professors are women.

Medical school deans said they believe the relative lack of women in some clinical specialties will soon disappear -- simply because women such as Darves and Kanth are going into them in greater numbers.

"Those numbers are starting to blur," said Dr. Latha Chandran, vice dean for undergraduate medical education at Stony Brook.

Dr. Lina Obeid, dean of research at Stony Brook, agreed. "I think the whole environment is more receptive," she said. "They [women] are about 50 percent of the class, they work equally hard and they are proving themselves and are accepted in the work environment."

Darves said she was drawn to urology because she "loves surgery" and the breadth of medical issues it offers. Kanth is interested in reconstructive plastic surgery for children because of the artistry it requires and impact it can have on patients’ quality of life.

Gone are the days that Coleman described when there were so few female obstetricians practicing in her hospital, it had no surgical dressing room for women.

As for increasing the number of women in leadership roles in academic medicine, medical schools are trying different approaches to attract and keep women -- whose careers are more often interrupted or slowed by child-rearing than men’s.

"When you look at the trajectory of women’s careers, they may be slower and circuitous and not a straight line," Chandran said. "Medicine is a demanding specialty. You have to keep up with the latest in literature, you have to work long hours. Especially in an academic specialty, you have a lot of responsibilities. That’s why when they [women] also have to deal with families and care of children, something has to go and they go into a holding pattern."

In 2006, Stony Brook started a Women in Medicine program that sponsors an annual research day to highlight papers by women and holds women faculty networking luncheons. Of the 815 medical
faculty, 346 are women, according to Stony Brook. Of that, 52 are professors, 71 associate professors, 195 are assistant professors and 28 are instructors. Eleven women faculty hold executive leadership positions, including as chairs, vice deans, and associate deans.

Women also are less likely to develop mentoring relationships, which can help advance careers, said Dr. Anne Taylor, vice dean for academic affairs at Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons. Taylor said Columbia offers a faculty development program and has begun peer mentorship groups, bringing senior and junior faculty women together to talk about career paths and finding a work-life balance.

At the Hofstra North Shore-LIJ School of Medicine, which will graduate its first class next year, 35 percent of assistant professors, 24 percent of associate professors and 14 percent of full professors are women, according to Dr. Veronica Catanese, dean for academic affairs at Hofstra's medical school.

“I think it's still an issue,” Catanese said of leadership positions for women in medicine. But, she added, the percentage of female doctors promoted has increased since Hofstra's med school opened three years ago.

And, she said, more young male doctors today are interested in taking family leave and finding a way to balance work and family, perhaps signaling a cultural shift.

She, like all of the doctors interviewed -- who started their own careers when they were in the distinct minority -- are optimistic that gender will one day cease to be an issue in medicine.

As Obeid put it: "I'm hopeful. It's a slow process but every woman being a good role model is helping."

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