

My Thoughts on Women and Mentoring

by Deborah MacFarlane MD, MPH

Two years ago I received a WDS Career Development Award to study the topic of “Women and Mentoring” with **Mary Maloney, MD**. Mary



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kindly let me stay at her home in Massachusetts for two weeks and in the evenings we would sit and mull over the topic. I remember trying to compile a list of what I considered to be the challenges female physicians face during their careers.

Although not entirely exclusive to females, the list I produced was as follows:

- Marriage/partnership
- Children-upbringing, education
- Health of self (e.g., infertility, menopause; health of spouse, children)
- Health/death of parents
- Development of own career and balance of this with career of partner
- Interpersonal-relationships with colleagues, nursing/administrative staff
- Household-maintenance

For the majority of us the main focus up until graduation had been our education. For some of us this had involved the sacrifices and challenges of leaving relationships, states and even countries to pursue our goals. Now that that had been ob-

tained, “career development” was the next focus. However, this was where the real challenge began. Before we just had to pass the familiar obstacle course of exams; now we had to juggle the points on the preceding list, but there was no exam to let us know if we were on the right track. No wonder it felt difficult.

I remember trying to prioritize the list. What would be the most stressful event on that list? Personally, death of a parent seemed high.

It occurred to me too that we tend to judge other women by our own high standards.

The following day I learned that my father in New Zealand had been diagnosed with widespread cholangiocarcinoma. He was the person whom, until I met my husband, I was closest to on this earth. I was truly devastated. Dad had apparently pushed my pram through Hagley Park in Christchurch, New Zealand, past the hospital grounds thinking then, before I could even talk, that he'd like me to be a doctor, but had never told me of this dream until I graduated from medical school. I finished the remaining week with Mary, gave my talk at the AAD for **Madeleine Duvic, MD** and spent ten days with my parents. As the doctor in the family, I had to liaise between medical staff and my family; a role familiar to a lot of you. My dad died several days after my return to Houston and I worked the day he died; all those years of putting patients first.

Shortly thereafter Mary asked me to write a chapter for *Advances in Dermatology*. I have to admit I forgot about the deadline. We have no other relatives in New Zealand and I had been concerned about my mother. Feeling completely incompetent I asked **Suzanne Olbricht, MD**, another mentor, who was now the editor if I could write the chapter for the following year. The chapter was written, submitted to the publisher, then recently I became very sick — too sick to proof the draft. The publishers said they understood and they would get it proofed. Not telling me they'd send it to Suzanne!

Around this time a female medical student whom I was personally mentoring suddenly lost her mother. I had known that her boyfriend had serious health problems and that she'd been trying to spend as much time as possible with him. When she cancelled her rotation with me and forgot to tell me I have to admit I was a little irked.

However, I got to thinking that as women, we know better than anyone else the challenges other women face; we really don't need to have men understand things from our perspective. A male can understand something like childbirth in theory, but we can't expect them to ever understand the emotional or physical components of the process. It occurred to me, too, that we tend to judge other women by our own high standards. “Why couldn't she complete the job when I'm dealing with my own issues and

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SCHEDULE OF EVENTS

MAY 5

Suzanne Olbricht, MD and Roberta Sengelmann, MD are organizing a luncheon at the Mohs Surgery meeting in Naples, FL at the Naples Grand Resort & Club Hotel at 1 p.m.

JUNE 6-10

WDS will host a *Play Safe in the Sun at the LPGA* event at Havre de Grace, Maryland. The event is chaired by Valerie Callender, MD and Cheryl Burgess, MD.

JUNE 23-24

Sandra Vause, MD is organizing a WDS *Families Play Safe in the Sun* event at the Manayuck Arts Festival in Philadelphia, PA.

JULY 19-20

Wilma Bergfeld, MD and Allison Moosally, MD are organizing a WDS *Families Play Safe in the Sun* community outreach event at the Cleveland Ingenuity Festival.

JULY 31-AUGUST 2

Boni Elewski, MD is organizing a WDS Leadership Development Retreat: *Life is About Choices* at the Short Hills (NJ) Hilton. This will take place just prior to the AAD Summer Academy in New York.

AUGUST 3

WDS Networking Reception at the AAD Summer Academy in New York on Friday, at 5:30 p.m.

SEPTEMBER 29-30

The WDS International Women's Dermatology Retreat takes place in Buenos Aires, Argentina in conjunction with the World Congress. The Retreat is being coordinated by Sandra Read, MD and Boni Elewski, MD.

OCTOBER 11

Carrie Jacob, MD is hosting a WDS Practice Enhancement Reception at her Chicago office (during the ASDS Conference).

OCTOBER 13

Suzanne Olbricht, MD and Roberta Sengelmann, MD are organizing a luncheon at the ASDS meeting in Chicago.

FEBRUARY 3, 2008

WDS Annual Meeting Luncheon in San Antonio, TX

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I get things done?" We need perhaps to be more forgiving of each other and to communicate to other women the circumstances or reasons for our inability to meet deadlines on occasion. I don't mean: "I had PMS, I couldn't make the meeting..." more: "I had a miscarriage and I've felt so sad I'll need an extension on that deadline."

Women are compassionate by nature and I think if we can communicate our emotions with each other and not keep them stoically to ourselves as we imagine men do, we'll function better in the workplace. With that in mind I called Suzanne and explained the circumstances of my illness; I could sense her immediate understanding. If I hadn't made that call, she'd have been too polite to have said anything but would never have understood and I would have lost an opportunity to communicate with someone whose opinion I value. Similarly, I called the medical student, lightened her load and she's just recently finished a very productive and mutually enjoyable rotation with me.

It's all too easy sometimes to talk about "glass ceilings" hindering career development. Women can act as resources for other women, however we need to communicate openly with each other and to treat each other with compassion. So I would therefore like to encourage my fellow Women's Dermatologic Society members to use the strengths we have as women — our compassion and communication skills, to better understand and aid each other in our own development and progression through this lifestyle we've chosen. ■



At the WDS *Play Safe in the Sun at the LPGA Safeway Invitational Golf Tournament* at Superstition Mountain, AZ on March 22-25, WDS members were out in force screening players and spectators for skin cancer. Pictured inside the WDS screening booth are: Jeanette Pitts, MD (event co-chair), Xuan Nguyen, MD, Kathy Lim, MD, and Kelli Ingram, MD. Special thanks to all the other volunteers: Selma Targovnik, MD, Jennifer Linder, MD, Jan Johnson, RN, Vicki Reski, JoAnn Roberts, Susan Laman, LP, Deb Lorsung, LPN, Rita Karlin, LPN, Lida Matejka, RN, Dianne Shaw Cummins, RN, Megan Machuzak, MD and Suzanne Connolly, MD (co-chair).