



Women in Ophthalmology

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Let's peep into history and see where it all started.

In Washington, DC, Isabel Hayes Chapin Barrows inserted her calling card into the Daily Morning Chronicle in 1871, becoming the first "lady oculist" in the United States. She established a list of firsts during her career: first woman admitted to the University of Vienna in Austria to study ophthalmology, first woman employed with regular pay as stenographer for the US congressional committees and privately for Secretary of State William H. Seward, first woman appointed to the faculty of Freedman's Hospital and Howard University in Washington, DC, and the first woman to make independent care a part of her ophthalmic practice. Isabel Barrows also financed her husband's schooling and raised 2 children while fulfilling other roles as missionary, editor, reporter, prison reformer and ambassador.

Dr Carol Shields currently Director of the Oncology Service, Wills Eye Hospital and Professor of Ophthalmology at Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia, USA, an inspiration to women Ophthalmologists all over the world has said in her interview on how she made it to the top 100 women ophthalmologists "When I entered ophthalmology nearly 40 years ago, I had one goal: to be good at what I chose to be my life's work - practicing medicine. I had no desire to be a huge leader, top ocular oncologist, or number one on a power list. It just shows that "stick-to-itness" (or finding and defining your goals and staying true to them, no matter what) - in my case, helping patients - can come with personal rewards. I grew up being treated the same way boys were and believing we had exactly the same opportunities, but things changed when I entered the workforce. When I first started at Wills Eye Hospital, 98 - 99 percent of specialists were male, and when I entered ocular oncology there were maybe three of four other women in this field. It took me a while to build my practice, but it didn't deter me; I wouldn't let gender inequality get me down, even though I saw men get leadership roles much easier than women. Achieving

equality is a slow process that starts in medical schools and gradually filters up the ranks, all the way to leadership positions. These positions still belong predominantly to men, but there are more and more female chiefs and chairs of departments".

There is an increasing number of women ophthalmologists in leadership roles, 16.8% of office bearers in Indian Ophthalmic societies are now women and 17% in various international Ophthalmic societies. Female authorship increased in both first and last author positions over last 5 years. Female first authorship is around 40%, whereas female last authorship is approximately 25%. The rise in female last authorship is increasing at a similar rate to female first authorship. The gender authorship association also suggests that senior women have positively impacted this progress by mentoring junior female authors.

"Balancing personal and professional life is an illusion; one must strive for excellence" quoting Dr Namrata Sharma, Professor of Ophthalmology Dr Rajendra Prasad Centre for Ophthalmic science. The single thing that all these powerful women have is the passion to make change happen, their unwavering focus and desire to excel at their field will continue to inspire women ophthalmologists who may sometimes be resentful of gender bias in income or opportunities. It's a tightrope walk but as Treacher-Collins noted in his history of Moorfields, "the chief reason for raking over the ashes of history is to provide inspiration for the future" and we can now see what tremendous impact women ophthalmologists all over the world are creating and will continue to do so.

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