

Congratulations to The
Dr. Susan Love Resident Writing Competition
2015 Winning Essays!

1st Place Winner

Superwoman: The Importance of Self-Care for Women in Medicine

By Preethi Raghu, MD

I sat at the kitchen counter, my short toddler legs dangling from the chair, as I cupped my face in fascination and watched my mother cook dinner. With wisps of flour in her hair and sweat beading on her forehead, she jostled a pan with searing hot vegetables and stirred a pot with a decadent stew. As she set the table, she made sure my uniform was ready for school tomorrow and found the work folder my dad was searching for. "This is superwoman," I thought. She was juggling us all at all times, and to me she was the very glue that held our busy family together. We were all focused on our own lives but she selflessly worked behind the scenes to make us function properly.

Fast forward to the present day, when women are empowered to pursue dreams such as careers in medicine. I dreamt one day of strutting down a hallway with a career in hand, knowing that I built it independently. All around me, I see female physicians achieving remarkable feats in the realms of medicine, teaching, and research.

However, I notice that a new breed of female physicians is emerging; a new kind of superwoman. She performs exceptionally at work in the hospital or in clinic, and then comes home to take on a second job, as the caretaker and breadwinner for a family. I see distinguished female surgeons taking short breaks to run to lactation rooms or to check on their families. Somehow, we have created immense expectations for women in medicine, as not only the caretaker at home but also the caretaker at work.

With such an efflux of altruistic efforts, a silent epidemic has been gnawing at female physicians: burnout. Although common in medicine as a whole, female physicians often assume multiple roles and sometimes shrug off early signs of burnout such as fatigue or poor sleep. I have heard residents work with heavy sighs, sacrificing nights at home with their children for sleepless nights at the hospital, and they leave feeling defeated despite their glowing accomplishments.

Our immense ability to reach out to others is limited by our ability to care of ourselves. Mental well-being is a sensitive topic even amongst physicians, as many of us pride ourselves on "toughing it out" through rough patches. However, when we

take dedicated time to build our own emotional reservoirs and to re-assess our perhaps unrealistic self-expectations, we can offer more genuine and loving care to others. In other words, even superwoman needs a foot massage now and then.

During intern year, I have found that the brutality of the schedule has been balanced by my own well-being practices of meditation and cooking. I will sometimes go days or weeks without carving out this time for myself, but when I have the nagging symptoms of burnout, I know my quick fixes. In fact, numerous clinical research studies have proven the power of a daily spiritual practice in fighting physician burnout.

In conclusion, as we venture out into the challenging and often uphill road of being women in medicine, it is of utmost importance that we do not lose sight of ourselves. We need a careful dose of reality in our often harsh expectations for ourselves, as well as personalized self-care techniques to avoid burnout. Ideally, I would love to run a household as adeptly as my mother while also running a busy medical practice. However, I have had to temper these expectations with my realistic time constraints, and pat myself on the back for what I do accomplish. Every time I feel a surge of guilt at taking time for myself, I have only to remind myself that caring for ourselves is not selfish. In fact, it is the most selfless thing we can do because it unlocks the energy and love we need to care for countless others.

2nd Place Winner

By Regina Toto, MD

When one hears the prompt "women and medicine," mechanically the notion of defying odds comes to mind- getting into medical school, having a family despite working full time, being the girl in a traditionally all-boys' club. But quite honestly the days of a woman in medicine defying odds are over; it is no longer unique or special to be a woman in medicine. In fact, many medical school classes are now more than 50% female. This fact begs the question: why, in 2015, do we continue to discuss "women and medicine" as if this pairing is in some way unusual?

Historically, gaining a medical degree as a woman was far from easy, and I speak for my female colleagues in expressing gratitude for the efforts of those who forged the path before us. Now, it is relatively easy for women to become physicians, and

accordingly, more and more women are deciding to pursue medical training. Even more impressively, women are choosing and excelling in specialties that were traditionally male-dominated. Additionally, the expansion of part time job opportunities has enhanced the flexibility of medical careers. And yet, despite these significant strides, we still have work to do.

Times have never been better for female professionals, and yet our society is quick to judge women in the workplace. Expectations are high: the projected ideal 30-something female physician is an expert clinician and researcher, an attentive partner, a fun-loving friend, and of course, a devoted mother of several adorable children. Any woman who fulfills the first of these criteria but not the latter three is often deemed "married to her job." Despite the fact that many women strive to attain accomplishments both within and without the workplace, we tend to focus exclusively on professional development when networking. This is not inappropriate, but the fact that we actively avoid discussing personal development in professional arenas is. Truthfully the person and the professional are one in the same, and arguably this is especially true with physicians. Why, then, do we shy away from openly discussing our work as it relates to our personal lives? Why do we fear that our professional development may be adversely affected by admitting that we may want to work part time, or that we dream of having children in the next few years? The sad reality is that sexism still exists in the workplace, and some people (including those in positions of power) cling to the belief that being a productive and successful professional and maintaining a rich and healthy home life are mutually exclusive.

Ultimately it is our feminine responsibility to embrace discussion of these forbidden topics and thereby advance women's rights in the workplace. We can no longer blame the gray haired male chauvinist; his is a dying species, and women are rapidly inheriting positions of influence in medicine. In order to change workplace culture, we should focus on professional development in the personal context. A few years back, as a third year medical student, I attended an all-female mentoring breakfast that would resonate with me for the next three years. During this breakfast I interacted with women at all levels of medical training, most of them attendings. Of course, with my residency application looming in the near future, I was acutely conscious of the potential advantages of making connections with these women. Moreover, though, I imagined what it would be like to be them. We spent most of the time during the breakfast talking about the

practice of medicine, specifically less about the details of research interests and who-knows-who and more about their typical work days. Only recently did I realize why this particular mentoring activity has stuck with me beyond myriad others: I got to know the physicians I met that day first as women, and thereby I gained the utmost respect for them as professionals.

Too often, the pressures- both internal and external- of a career in medicine can be overwhelming. Undoubtedly the preponderance of type A personalities in medicine accentuates this pervasive sensation of pressure. I speak from personal experience: so many times I have looked to role models with admiration for their devoted patients, their adoring medical students, and of course, their decorated CVs. What I only rarely discover is how they actually made it this far and from whence they derive happiness and personal satisfaction. These are the questions seldom asked that should actually form the heart of our networking conversations: how do you keep yourself motivated? How does your career fit you as a person? How about as a friend, partner or mother? In order to banish the stigma of these often shushed topics, we need to confront and explore them. It will be uncomfortable at times and unpopular with some. But the only way to make such topics mainstream, and thereby liberalize professional life for all women, is to take the plunge. As they say, the only way out is through.

My hope for my daughters, should they choose to pursue medicine, is this: that they will be guided by hardworking but balanced female physicians who show them the way not just to dissect a cadaver or conduct a study, but also how to create a fulfilling career as one aspect of a fulfilling life. I hope in their day that there is no such thing as a "taboo" topic when it comes to the personal lives of professional women. I hope that women can openly and freely embrace and pursue their personal goals while being respected as accomplished professionals. Most of all, I hope that my daughters realize that their fellow female physicians are their greatest strength in this formative journey, and that only by joining together can we realize our fullest potential to enact change.

2015 Susan Love Resident Writing Competition Bios

SUSAN LOVE RESIDENT WRITING COMPETITION

FIRST PLACE WINNER

Preethi Raghu, MD



Preethi Raghu, MD was born in South India and raised in the U.S. She started writing poetry and prose in middle school, and grew to love the intensity of translating emotions and stories onto paper. During medical school, she got involved in AMWA as a regional director, and later as national program chair. Dr. Raghu combined her love for writing and for AMWA during intern year by writing for the ARQ. She is now completing intern year at Albany Medical Center and starting radiology residency in Rochester. Dr. Raghu is grateful to the Susan Love competition for encouraging her passion for becoming a physician-writer

SUSAN LOVE RESIDENT WRITING COMPETITION

SECOND PLACE WINNER

Regina Toto, MD



Regina Toto, MD is a graduate of the George Washington University in Washington, DC, where she was introduced to AMWA by a friend and ultimately remained involved with this wonderful chapter throughout medical school. Regina served as one of the student conference chairs for the 2012 AMWA Conference in Miami, Florida. She graduated from GW AOA and as a member of the Gold Humanism Honor Society. Regina is now a second year Pediatrics resident at the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh, where she is continually inspired by her co-residents. She looks forward to serving as a chief resident in the 2016-2017 year.