ANIL AGGRAWAL'S
Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology
The world's first online journal devoted entirely to forensic medicine and toxicology · Published 1 January and 1 July

VOL. 11, NO. 2
Downloaded from www.anilaggrawal.com · ISSN 0972-8074 (Online) · https://www.anilaggrawal.com/ij/vol_011_no_002/others/editorial.html;

Editorial

CITE THIS ARTICLE

Quigley, C. No "Glass Ceiling" (Editorial). *Anil Aggrawal's Internet Journal of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology* [serial on the Internet]. 2009; Vol. 11, No. 2 (July - December 2010): [about 5 p]. Available from: https://www.anilaggrawal.com/ij/vol_011_no_002/others/editorial.html; Published July 1, 2010,

No "Glass Ceiling"

-Christine Quigley

Author of
The Corpse: A History
Modern Mummies, and
Skulls and Skeletons
United States of America

E-mail: quigley@georgetown.edu
Blog: www.quigleyscabinet.blogspot.com
Email: quigley@georgetown.edu

Christine Quigley, USA



It's heartening to know that the field of forensic pathology has been trending toward the inclusion of more women in the workplace, particularly in leadership positions. At a time when women are expected to make up an equal 50 percent of the American work force in the near future, their rates still lag behind men in the areas of math, science, and engineering. Research suggests that the

remedy for this, now that overt discrimination has been eliminated through legal and other measures, is simple visibility. Stanford University psychologist Mary Murphy has found that women are less likely to pursue work in settings where they are outnumbered by men. The factors, beyond socialization and family care-taking responsibilities, are what Murphy calls “situational cues.” The participants in her study reported a lower sense of belonging and less desire to participate when gender was skewed toward men. “Women probably feel more identity-safe in the environment where there are more women. They feel that they really could belong there," Murphy reasons. A full 25 percent of the 300 to 400 forensic pathologists in the United States are women. This number will certainly continue to climb as women see other women heading academic forensic anthropology departments and directing medical examiner's offices.

...Many women in high-profile positions are leading by example. Dr. Elizabeth Laposata , who currently holds faculty positions at Brown University and Boston University, has worked as an Assistant Medical Examiner for the City of St. Louis, the City of Philadelphia, and the State of Delaware. She was honored as Woman of the Year in 2003 by the Rhode Island Commission on Women, during which time (1993 to 2005) she was serving as the state's Chief Medical Examiner...
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Another woman who has exemplified the field is **Dr. Marcella F. Fierro,** who retired in January 2008 as Chief Medical Examiner for the Commonwealth of Virginia. Her 32-year career as a forensic pathologist began with her medical residency at the Cuyahoga County (Ohio) Coroner's Office. Dr. Fierro went on to become one of the country's first female medical examiners, serving as a model for the profession and paving the way for other female medical examiners. She is gratified to see increasing numbers of women entering forensic pathology and remembers being one of only three or four women in the career – they called themselves the “Femme Fatales” - in the 1970s. One of the ways Dr. Fierro has brought visibility to the field is by acting as a consultant to best-selling author Patricia Cornwell, whose crime novels feature female forensic pathologist Dr. Kay Scarpetta. She began advising Cornwell on the technical and scientific aspects of her books in the 1980s, after a three-hour discussion and a tour of the morgue. When Cornwell asked to observe an autopsy, Dr. Fierro told her it was not a spectator sport and insisted that she become a volunteer police officer to do so. Cornwell describes Dr. Fierro as enthusiastic, eloquent, and incredibly inspiring. “Had I not met her,” she says, “I would not have been interested in forensic medicine.” Other women with no knowledge of forensic science may be similarly swayed by Cornwell's female protagonist, or by the fictional female medical examiners on popular television shows like “Law and Order,” “CSI,” and “Criminal Minds.”

...Two people in the State of Maine hold the title of forensic pathologist – both of them women. Dr. Peggy Greenwald is the state's Chief Medical Examiner and Dr. Marguerite DeWitt is the Deputy Chief Medical Examiner. They illustrate the trend in Maine, the United States, and beyond: the emergence of women in this highly specific and investigative field of medicine...
Two people in the State of Maine hold the title of forensic pathologist – both of them women. **Dr. Peggy Greenwald** is the state's Chief Medical Examiner and **Dr. Marguerite DeWitt** is the Deputy Chief Medical Examiner. They illustrate the trend in Maine, the United States, and beyond: the emergence of women in this highly specific and investigative field of medicine. Dr. DeWitt describes her job as recreating the last moments of someone's life, and spent twelve years as a hospital pathologist conducting medical autopsies before taking up forensic pathology in 2000. "No two cases are ever alike," she says. "We, as investigators, must always prepare for the unexpected. It's that sense of the unexpected that I love." When Dr. Greenwald completed her forensic pathology fellowship in Los Angeles twenty years ago, 90 percent of the staff of the California M.E.'s office were men. As the field opened up to women, she began to see more women training for it. Dr. Greenwald, Dr. DeWitt, state forensic anthropologist **Dr. Marcella Sorg** , and the other two female members of their staff of nine defy stereotypes: "I don't think people realize women are not only doing the autopsies, but also the actual investigating, the piecing together," says DeWitt. "We have many brilliant investigators in this field who are female." DeWitt believes they have the right balance of tenacity and sensitivity for the job, which requires interacting with people ranging from police to victims' family members. (By the way, at the Kentucky M.E.'s office, Dr. Weakley-Jones was known as the “Morgue Mother” for her mother-like attitude and demeanor.) Dr. Greenwald sees more equal opportunities for women to get into the field. Dr. DeWitt agrees: "There's a sense that we've arrived. The glass ceiling has been broken."

The momentum of women in forensic science sweeps wider than just the United States. **Dr. Lorna Martin** became the first South African woman to direct a forensic medicine department (and at the same time made it an all-female cohort) when she was appointed to head the Forensic Medicine and Toxicology department at the University of Cape Town in 2004. It was an early introduction to crime novels that sparked Dr. Martin's career choice, but the prospect of doing something both scientific and caring that drove it. Much of her focus has been on gender violence. She believes women bring special qualities to the job and hopes her appointment will pave the way for women in the profession. Dr. Martin still reads crime novels and is a fan of the BBC drama “Silent Witness,” about a team of three forensic pathologists, one of whom is a woman.

...While crime dramas and fiction do their part to inspire potential female forensic pathologists, Dr. Jan Garavaglia - by appearing on the Discovery Health Channel's documentary series “Dr. G: Medical Examiner” - does arguably the most to lend visibility to this career. She completed her fellowship in forensic pathology at the Dade County Medical Examiner's Office in Miami, Florida, and took her first job in 1988 as an Associate Medical Examiner in Duval County, Jacksonville, Florida...
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Garavaglia is currently the Chief Medical Examiner in Orange County, Florida, and her staff of fourteen includes six women, among them Associate Medical Examiners **Dr. Marie Hansen** and **Dr. Sara Hiott Irrgang -** who has practiced pathology for over 30 years in four M.E. Districts in Florida and “hopes to be a novelist when she grows up.” Perhaps she will write realistic crime novels featuring a female medical examiner that will in turn inspire another generation of college-bound women to choose the forensic pathology track...

Further Reading

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