“With more females entering the dental profession, changes will be evident”

An interview with Women in Dentistry Society members Janki Solanki, Radhika Ladwa and Roxanne Mehdizadeh

More women are expected to graduate in dentistry in the UK than men in the years to come. With a larger share of female dentists in the overall workforce, the profession will face new challenges that need to be addressed. A society, Women in Dentistry, recently founded by King’s College London Dental Institute students is seeking to find means of raising the profile of female dental leaders through a nationwide network. Dental Tribune had the opportunity to speak with members Janki Solanki (Co-President), Radhika Ladwa (Co-President) and Roxanne Mehdizadeh (lead writer and publicity) about the initiative and how it intends to help female students achieve their full potential in dentistry.

“With more females entering the dental profession, changes will be evident”

Dental Tribune: Dentistry has traditionally been a male-dominated profession. Why do you think an increasing number of women have been entering the field in recent years?

Janki Solanki: The general trend in the UK is that more females are going to university than males across the board. Educationalists say the under-representation of male university students is down to attainment patterns in schools and girls outperform boys up to the age of 11. Female students who perform well at GCSE and A levels are more likely to consider high-profile courses with high entry requirements such as dentistry.

Radhika Ladwa: It is unclear why certain subjects attract more women than men, or vice versa. One of the key predictors of what someone will study is what subjects he or she took at A level, and recently attempts have been made to encourage girls to study science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects.

Dental Tribune: Dentistry offers both lifelong learning and career progression opportunities, as well as the option of flexibility and part-time work, means it is suited to a variety of women, whatever their priorities in life may be. However, it is challenging to pinpoint a single reason for the increase in women entering the profession, as people have a diversity of requirements from and aspirations in life and so varying aspects of a career in dentistry will appeal to different women.

Radhika Ladwa: While females share similar leadership aspirations, there has been a failure to create and sustain an environment in which they feel fully accepted and supported to succeed. Gender bias, especially when it comes to leadership, is evident across all industries and the profession of dentistry is no different. The assumption that a woman cannot be a good leader, or be one while exhibiting female traits, must be addressed.

Roxanne Mehdizadeh: Gender difference is dynamic and socially constructed, and what is considered stereotypical gender behaviour can be changed over time. Therefore, the goal is not just ensuring equal numbers of men and women (gender equality), but also acquiring fairness and justice in the pathway to higher positions (gender equity).

With our society, we hope to help provide the networks, resources and mentoring that will not only make people aware of equality issues, but also recognize the role of female leaders, and support and develop the qualities they offer, which will only strengthen the industry.

Was this the main reason for founding the group?

Solanki: Having recognised the under-representation of females in leadership positions prompted important discussions. However, we felt a suitable forum for this did not exist. Fortunately, being students at the Dental Institute, we are surrounded by incredibly successful females at the top of their field in the dental profession, and we wanted to take the opportunity to make these role models accessible to all students and learn from their experiences.

Ladwa: The group was established to help students achieve their full potential in dentistry. It is open to all and in essence any dental student can become a member.

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