



Holding Up **HALF THE SKY**

WOMEN IN SINGAPORE MEDICINE

The Impact of Women in the Healthcare Workforce
38th CMAAO General Assembly 2024

Various Reasons for under-representation

- Societal norms and values
- Biases in structures, systems, policies and processes throughout our society
- Women being assigned disproportionate responsibility for family caregiving and "softer" roles such as nurturing or welfare-supporting functions
- Inadvertent effects of government policies, hold women back from making the same sort of progress marked by men

Women in Singapore healthcare

- The preponderance of women in nursing reflected the historical dominance of men in medicine
- The country saw very few women enrolling in medical school; the second graduating class of the Straits Settlements Medical School (the forerunner of the National University of Singapore [NUS] Medical School) in 1911 included just two women – E Nunes and JS Lee.
- Early women doctors in Singapore:
 - **Tan Sri Dr Salma binti Ismail**, first Malay woman to qualify as a medical practitioner in Malaya
 - **Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamad Ali**, first woman to be appointed medical officer
 - **Prof Low Poh Sim**, Senior Consultant, Division of Paediatric Neurology, Khoo Teck Puat-National University Children's Medical Institute; National University Hospital Professor, Department of Paediatrics, NUS Medicine
 - **Prof Chay Oh Moh**, Senior Consultant, Department of Respiratory Medicine, KK Women's and Children's Hospital
 - **Prof Leo Yee Sin**, Director, Institute of Infectious Diseases & Epidemiology; Clinical Director, Communicable Disease Centre; Senior Consultant, Department of Infectious Diseases, Tan Tock Seng Hospital; Clinical Professor, NUS Medicine

Women in Singapore healthcare

- Women today are still not as well represented in leadership roles, such as heads of department and assistant or vice-chairs of medical boards, as their male counterparts.
 - At the National University Health System, 2019 figures show that women hold 21.2% or 41 out of 193 senior leadership posts, and out of a clinician population of 1,700, women make up 39.1%, or 664.
 - At the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (NUS Medicine), 33.3% assistant professors, 28.6% associate professors and just 10.1% tenured full professors (as of 2019) are women.
 - At the National Healthcare Group, women occupy 32 of 117 senior leadership posts in 2019. Out of the clinician population of 1,512, women comprise 42%. Over at SingHealth, 48% of the 2,393 clinicians are women and they hold 76 out of 272 leadership positions.

More women in medical practice today

- The 1979 quota capping female enrolment in medicine at NUS to just a third has been identified as a major contributing factor to this imbalance in gender representation. With the growing demand for healthcare services, the Government abolish the policy in 2003. The decision was well-received universally and "served to rectify the anomaly in which "less qualified" male students were preferentially admitted to NUS Medicine over 'more qualified' female students, many of whom went overseas to study medicine and never returned to Singapore."
- Five years after the quota was removed:
 - 2008: women made up nearly 49% of enrolment in the NUS Medicine undergraduate degree programme.
 - 2018: the intake of females comprised at least 55% of the freshman cohort entering NUS Medicine. In the same year, the percentage of females enrolled in Duke-NUS Medical School made up at least 53% of the incoming cohort, while they comprised between 30% and 40% of the students in the Lee Kong Chian School of Medicine's first four intakes.¹⁰
 - The female students from NUS Medicine are at the forefront of student leadership, helming projects and initiatives such as large-scale public health screening campaigns, as well as community service programmes here and even in neighbouring countries.

Working towards a better tomorrow

- Women will eventually fill more leadership posts in the coming years but this requires intentional efforts by institutions and individuals to recognise, acknowledge and address the issues.
- Since 2017, the National University Health System's (NUHS) Women in Science & Healthcare (WISH) has been working closely with the NUHS leadership to raise awareness, facilitate access and promotion for women, as well as address misperceptions and unconscious biases in the clinical and medical sciences.
- The creation of the Equal Opportunities for Career Development Office within NUS Medicine in 2019 seeks to plug the leaky pipeline of women in academic medicine and aims to offer both men and women equal opportunities and rewards in academia.