

Editor's comment

A monstrous regiment



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The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women was written by the Scottish reformer, John Knox, in 1558. The 'regiment' that he was referring to was government and the book was aimed specifically at Mary I of Scotland and Mary I of England. His argument was of course that biblical law states that women are subservient to men and so should not rule over them – under any circumstances.

Apparently, within a decade, most doctors in the UK will be women – it's official – published in the *British Medical Journal*. What is interesting is that, in 2009, this is worthy of comment in a leading medical journal. This perhaps suggests that, although the current editor of the journal is a woman, there is still a certain amount of astonishment that women are doctors at all. A friend of mine – a staunch feminist – admitted that the first time she saw a particular woman GP she thought, 'You are too young and pretty to be a doctor'.

As I was growing up feminist attitudes were starting to become common among the girls and then women that I knew. By the time I started my first degree the universities were happily admitting more women into subjects previously thought of as mainly

the preserve of men – engineering, the physical sciences. Biology was pretty evenly split I seem to remember, although there were fewer women who carried on to PhD and my own PhD field – seabird ecology – was dominated by men. The same was true of postdoctoral research and work in the same field.

Medicine, however, once again seemed pretty evenly split – at least it was at UCT when I started in 1984. Most of my contemporaries have carried on in clinical practice – many as specialists. I also seem to remember that the Rhodes Scholars from my graduating year were women. So what is all the fuss about women in medicine? As a correspondent to the *BMJ* points out, traditionally healers, midwives and herbalists were women; one brave woman in the 18th century was a bonesetter – Sarah Mapp. In ancient times nuns were traditionally involved in medicine in some way, although it was generally their fellow monks who were thought of as holding true knowledge of medicine – a dangerous idea in medieval Europe where you were more likely to survive without 'medical' attention than with it.

Could it be that society still holds the prejudices against women that have long

prevented them from rising to the top in their chosen professions – even now, in 2009? I still hear the arguments that women stop to have babies, they are more likely to take time off work and so on and so on. But in fact, it is this very characteristic of women that should make them ideal for medicine – their traditional role as carers and nurturers. In this age of highly technological medicine perhaps we need a 'woman's touch' – yes I know – dreadfully politically incorrect! But stop and look around you. What has happened to the feminist ideal? Once again, women are being judged by their looks, their clothes, their place in society in relation to men. Just look at any news website and see the photographs that accompany any article that deals with women's issues; look in magazines and on the television. There seems to be a slow erosion of all the hard work that went into giving women an equal place in the world and stopping them being sex objects before anything else.

The rise of women in medicine in the UK is heartening. Perhaps we can start to turn the tide again if women take their rightful place in society as caring and efficient professionals – who also happen to bear children – and generally manage their lives considerably better than most men do.

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