



Canada has its first female dean — 170 years after first medical school opened

Nancy Robb

The woman who is going to steer Dalhousie University's medical school into the future has mixed feelings about becoming the country's first female dean of medicine.

"I'm honoured to have been chosen and I do see this as a footnote in medical history in Canada," says Dr. Noni MacDonald, head of infectious diseases at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) in Ottawa. "But it's kind of sad that it's 1999 before this footnote is being made."

MacDonald, who is also a full professor at the University of Ottawa, assumes the Halifax position July 1, replacing Dr. John Ruedy. Ruedy, who has been dean since 1992, has spent the past 37 years in academic medicine.

MacDonald, a University of Ottawa graduate who trained at McGill and in the US, is a well-established clinician. Among other things, she has headed the cystic fibrosis and HIV clinics at CHEO, edited a journal for pediatricians, served on the national advisory committee on immunization and written 140 research papers.

"For much of my career I've often been the only woman in divisions, on committees, things like that," she says, "and most of the time [my sex] has been totally irrelevant. I've found it rather amazing that people have made such big point of that aspect of this appointment."

However, she does hope it will have a positive impact. "I hope it will encourage other women to look at these kinds of jobs," she says. "Many of us have never put our names forward because we never thought we would ever be able to do it or even allowed in to do it."

"I guess that women are a bit more tentative than men

are about going after these jobs. Having a woman there may make them less tentative."

Dr. Judith Kazimirski, a CMA past president, agrees. "It sends a strong message that you can do this, that you too can be a leader," says Kazimirski, a family physician from Windsor, NS.

In 1996 Kazimirski became the third woman to head the CMA, which named its first female president, Dr. Bette Stephenson, in 1974. Kazimirski says women now account for 50% of the country's medical students and 26% of its practising physicians, so there are bound to be more female deans. "Now that women have the numbers, they need the opportunities to put forward their skills in the administrative and teaching environment," she says.

She thinks the appointment of a female dean not only deserves note but is also long overdue. "Whether you are looking at medical practice or politics, or medical education and administration, there has been a significant lack of women leaders in Canada in those fields . . . and [women] have not had a high profile."

MacDonald is convinced that this will change over time. "Simply because of the demands of the job, it takes longer to have a large number of women up [at this level]," she says. "Many women will not sacrifice their family for their career."

MacDonald, who has managed to pursue both family and career since graduating from the U of O in 1975, won't be alone at Dalhousie, where women already account for three-quarters of the medical school's associate deans. Ruedy says this means that the appointment of a woman as his replacement wasn't such a signal event here.

He expects the 50-year-old MacDonald, who is known for her tenacity and problem-solving abilities, to bring vigour, enthusiasm and people skills to the position. During his own tenure, he has broadened the school's horizons through international education initiatives and links with external health agencies. He has also worked to strengthen its research arm. Over the past 5 years, the school's research revenues have climbed from \$12 million to \$27 million annually.

MacDonald says Dalhousie's reputation for being innovative and its premier position within the province brought her to the Maritimes. "Dalhousie provides all the tertiary care for Nova Scotia, so it has a very different relationship with the Ministry of Health," she says. "I see this as an excellent way to have an impact."



Ottawa Citizen photo

MacDonald: A new role model for women?

Nancy Robb is a freelance writer living in Halifax.