



An Orthodox practice

Susan Pinker

Dr. Perle Feldman calls herself the Queen of Juggling. A family physician and mother of 4 children aged 7 to 17, this queen also teaches at McGill University and manages a large “womb-to-tomb” practice. However, the thing that culls her from the crowd is her special interest in the health of mothers and babies in Montreal’s ultra-Orthodox Hasidic community. “Being a mother of a large family is a tremendous honour in the Lubavitcher community,” Feldman explains. “The mothers have a lot of power.”

And it was these women who honoured Feldman last year with the *Eshes Chayil* — Woman of Valour — Award. All 500 women attending the award dinner wore wigs, modestly covering their hair, and most wore hats to cover the wigs. All, that is, except the 43-year-old Feldman, whose silver hair fell across her forehead as she spoke. When she described, in an inimitable soft voice, the powerful moment when a baby’s head crowns, forks stopped in mid-air; 500 women were paralysed by the most intimate thread of their shared experience.

She describes her approach to practice as “kvetch and whine” medicine because treatment usually involves lots of psychotherapy and storytelling. Feldman also admits to exploiting her 4 children “shamelessly” in order to normalize the problems of parenthood.

“It’s been a feminist journey for me,” says Feldman of her decision to practise general medicine and concentrate on delivering babies. In the 1970s the budding, 17-year-old social activist spent her spare time doing abortion counselling at a women’s centre in Montreal’s student ghetto. Peer and contraceptive counselling came next. “I knew I wanted to work in women’s health, and . . . I realized that the buck stops with the doctor. The responsibility is there.”

She admits that medicine has taken her in many direc-

tions. “My first was the ‘walk-like-a-man’ stage — anything you can do I can do better. I viewed achievement from a male perspective. But when I became a mother, I didn’t want to see success only through a male optic.”

After many years at the Herzl Family Practice Clinic at the Jewish General Hospital, Feldman had a chance to step in for a doctor with a large private practice. She began delivering babies, largely for women from the Lubavitcher community who accounted for about half her practice.

Feldman attributes her affinity to the Orthodox community to childhood neighbours and playmates. Although she speaks Yiddish fluently and her penchant for long skirts lends her authenticity, Feldman is neither an Orthodox Jew nor a member of the Lubavitch sect. She was drawn to delivering babies in large, Lubavitcher Hasidic families not only because “it’s repeat business, guaranteed” but also because she regards women in this community as “well grounded. They’re not all tied up with modern, neurotic concerns. There is a strong belief that things can happen and the women can extract meaning from them without fear or a desire to control. It’s a receptiveness, but it’s not passive.”

There is irony in Feldman’s transition from abortion-rights advocate to her current stature in a community where large families — 8 children is the norm — are common. But her former student, friend and colleague, Dr. Lisa Graves, is adamant that there is no conflict between the 2 pursuits. “It makes perfect sense. It’s truly about having the right to choose your route.”

Graves then brings up the poetic phrase used for informed consent in Quebec, *consentement éclairé*, which she translates as illuminated judgement. “For Perle, it’s like shining a flashlight on who you are, and it doesn’t matter if the person is poor from the Pointe, a pregnant Orthodox woman, or a medical student — Perle has always respected people’s choices.”



Nicole Rivelli

Dr. Perle Feldman (second left, rear) and some of her Lubavitcher patients