

## International Women's Day: An interview with some of the doctors of Macquarie



Dr Janani Mahadeva (left) and Dr Fiona Foo

Marked annually on 8 March, International Women's Day (IWD) is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women. This day serves as a powerful reminder of the progress made towards gender equality and highlights the work that still needs to be done. The theme for IWD 2024 is **Inspire Inclusion**, emphasising the importance of diversity and empowerment in all aspects of society. This theme underscores the crucial role of inclusion in achieving gender equality, calling for action to break down barriers, challenge stereotypes, and create environments where all women are valued and respect respected.

To celebrate IWD 2024, we sat down with two inspiring female doctors in our organisation to discuss what IWD means to them, who inspires them, and what advice they have for women interested in pursuing their career.

### **Dr Janani Mahadeva (General Practitioner)**

#### **Why do you think it is important to celebrate IWD?**

IWD is a celebration of the excellence that we are able to achieve in our pursuits, despite challenges and adversities that we need to overcome in the context of our professional work and personal life. It is a reminder that we need to celebrate and support the achievements of women that we work alongside.

#### **How have you overcome barriers in your career?**

Like many of my colleagues, I believe the key has been persistence, continuing to work hard in all situations (especially those that are challenging) and finding colleagues and a mentor who are supportive and encouraging.

**What is the most important message you want to send out to women thinking about their careers?**

Seize opportunities that you are presented with and try not to second guess or question your abilities and success.

**Who is a woman who has inspired you and why?**

My mother has been the greatest inspiration for me – she has a strong work ethic, has balanced work and family life really well, and always instilled a belief in everyone around her that anything is possible (and there are no limits to what you can achieve!)

**Dr Fiona Foo (Cardiologist)****Why do you think it is important to celebrate International Women's Day?**

I always celebrate 8 March as it's my husband's birthday. In all seriousness, IWD is important as it is an opportunity to reflect on and acknowledge **all** the women of the world. While there's a tendency to praise women who achieve amazing things, all the women doing great things everyday should be celebrated. It's also international, and in our current world, where there has been more racial divide and discrimination of late, it's a good way of bringing together women of all races, religions and beliefs, and remembering the importance of compassion and humanity. Lastly, it's a good way of highlighting ongoing gender disparities, especially in health. In cardiology there are significant gender disparities with poorer outcomes for women, so I take this opportunity to highlight heart disease in women, encourage all health professionals to stop practising 'bikini medicine', (the idea that women's health only differs from men in the areas that would be covered by a bikini) and ask all women to get a heart health check.

**How have you overcome barriers in your career?** I have been fortunate to have not had too many barriers to overcome. It was only in 2018 I realised I was one of just 17 female interventional cardiologists in Australia, and was the only female interventionalist in the four hospitals I had worked in for many years. The study highlighted that there were 'obstacles' for women to do cardiology/interventional cardiology, but I couldn't think of any. I have had wonderful mentors (most of them males), who had been very encouraging, and to whom I owe my career. Maybe I was lucky, that it was almost a 'novelty' 20 years ago to be a female interventional cardiologist. In 2008 I was interviewed for an interventional cardiology fellowship and was told I would be remembered as I was the only female applying for the job.

I come from a generation, culture and upbringing that deal with barriers by working hard, not complaining, and 'getting on with it'; I started working at McDonald's at 14. Being a manager at McDonald's and a having a second job as a waitress allowed me to pay for and get through medical school. I've kept that hardworking ethic to get me through tough times. I've also made sure I have other interests to keep me going like travel and fitness – everything always seems better after going for a long run! I also believe in karma, good things happen to good people, whatever fight you come up against the 'good' side will always win (eventually). At least that's what I tell my children.

**What is the most important message you want to send out to women thinking about their careers?**

Be humble – the people I respect the most are the ones who practise humility and are not self-aggrandising. Be nice, and particularly acknowledge and thank people who do a great job. Respecting everyone, no matter what their position is, goes a long way. I still remember when I started in MUH in 2012, Carol Bryant (the CEO of MUH at the time) would always greet me (with my name) and ask how I was going. Be different – do not feel you need to do the same as everyone else. I started presenting and writing about heart disease in women when I returned from overseas in 2011, as I was seeing a lot of female patients. Back then it wasn't that topical but now it's become quite in vogue. One of the most rewarding aspects of my career includes teaching interventional cardiology in Nepal and Fiji, which has reinforced my philosophy of being grateful for what you have. Be curious, incorporate your interests into your work – I talked more about adverse pregnancy outcomes and cardiovascular disease when I was pregnant, and learnt about sports cardiology as I was running a lot of half marathons. Involve yourself in things that are meaningful and for the right reasons – this is why I help lead the MQ Health Sustainability Committee and am an active member of Doctors for the Environment Australia, advocating about the health harms of climate change. Lastly, travel and get out of your comfort zone – going overseas, particularly to the developing world will widen your horizons, make you appreciate what you have, and regularly burst the bubbles we tend to inhabit.

**Who is a woman who has inspired you and why?**

It would be unfair to only have just one woman who has inspired me, as there are so many women that have had long-lasting impacts on my life. I will mention a few...


My mum – who migrated from Malaysia with 3 children less than 6 years old, worked as a fulltime nurse in the geriatrics ward at Royal Perth Hospital; made multiple dishes for dinner every night, kept our house spotless, tried hard to give us opportunities that she never had as a child, and never complained. She is still running around looking after my niece and nephews in Perth, after my father passed away. The selflessness and hard work ethic of her generation and culture are much to be admired.

My older sister – probably the most influential female in my life. I have always admired her strength, knowledge and style and continue to look up to her.

Dr Michelle Graham – an interventional cardiologist in Edmonton, Canada, who took me and all the cardiology fellows under her wing, was well liked and respected by everyone. She was always appreciative of staff – she would bring Starbucks coffee for everyone – but also had a good work/life balance. I remember her saying, "I'm a better mother because I work."

Dr Kerry Jane Hogg – the first female interventionalist in Scotland, a cyclist, with several kids. She was diagnosed with metastatic brain/lung cancer following difficulty performing a cardiac stent insertion, while I was doing an interventional fellowship at Golden Jubilee National Hospital. She died a few months later, on Christmas day. She was only 51. Her story reinforces why you always run your own race, work to live rather than live to work, and can never take anything for granted.

My cousin – who was diagnosed a few years ago with metastatic colon cancer at the age of 35. She is still fighting and has always remained positive. Even before her diagnosis, she was living her life to the fullest, travelling extensively overseas, rock-climbing, skiing, mountain biking, and remaining a free spirit.

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