

Women of Impact in Anesthesiology: One Doctor's Quest to Celebrate Women's Voices

Maureen Geoghegan

Women have been leaders in anesthesiology since the early days of our specialty. As early as 1909, Dr. Isabella Herb, the first woman president of the American Association of Anesthetists, served as head of the department of anesthesia at Presbyterian Hospital. And Dr. Herb is not alone. Our specialty is rich in women leaders, including four ASA presidents in the past decade.

And yet, although gender parity has been achieved in medical school admissions and graduations, women still make up just over a third of full-time faculty in academic anesthesiology in the U.S. and remain under-represented in leadership positions and as award recipients (The state of women in academic medicine: the pipeline and pathways to leadership. 2014). Women in anesthesiology continue to be compensated at lower rates than their male counterparts (asamonitor.pub/3h1hY3n). And when it comes to information about the lived experiences of women in our field, information has been hard to come by.

Dr. Allison Fernandez, a pediatric anesthesiologist, pain medicine physician, and clinical researcher at Johns Hopkins All Children's Hospital, wanted to help close this gap by elevating the voices of women leaders in anesthesiology. As a 2020 recipient of the ASA Mentoring Grant Program from ASA's Committee on Professional Diversity, Dr. Fernandez created "Women of Impact in Anesthesiology," a video series featuring prominent women who have contributed



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Isabella Herb, MD, Chief Anesthetist at Presbyterian Hospital, demonstrates ethylene-oxygen equipment to (center and right) Jay Bailey Carter, MD, and Arno B. Luckhardt, MD. From the Rush University Medical Center archives.

to the specialty. Interviewees include Drs. Linda Mason, Jane Fitch, Mary Dale Peterson, Beverly Philip, Cynthia Wong, Roberta Hines, Colleen Koch, and others. The series can be viewed on ASA's website at www.asahq.org/womenofimpact.

"I wanted to create a kind of professional advice column, so anesthesiologists like me could learn from the women who have walked this path before us," said Dr. Fernandez. The series highlights topics that don't always get

attention, such as the interviewees' experiences with leadership development, mentoring, imposter syndrome, and work-life balance. The wide-ranging conversations are loaded with tactical advice, revealing experiences, and useful takeaways.

"One thing that stood out to me was the variety of paths these women took to success," said Dr. Fernandez. "And the different ways they've tackled shared challenges." The series explores these shared challenges, excavating common themes and experiences. Guests pointed to work-life balance, for example, agreeing that women still carry extra burdens, leading to missed opportunities for learning, networking, and advancement. Interviewees identified gender bias as another ongoing problem, acknowledging that there's more work needed to educate colleagues and advance equity.

"Guests agreed on many of the challenges faced by women in anesthesiology, but highlighted different aspects and solutions. I think the audience will find the diversity of ideas and voices thoughtful and inspiring," said Dr. Fernandez. Suggested solutions and ideas for promoting advancement ranged from going the extra mile to support other women, to finding ways to expose young doctors to the specialty earlier in the career path, to urging young professionals to focus on leadership, networking, and mentorship early in their careers.

Finally, like Dr. Fernandez herself, these prominent women anesthesiologists expressed optimism about the specialty's future. "Things are improving," Dr. Fernandez said. "My hope is that more candid and visible conversations about where we're at – and where we need to go – will help move the specialty, and the women who are dedicated to it, forward." ■