NOTABLE NOTES

Defying the Odds: Dr Ricky Kanee Schachter
Margaret Maria Cocks, MD, PhD

Becoming a physician is challenging in any age but was made doubly difficult by religion and sex in early 20th-century North America. Dr Ricky Kanee Schachter (1918-2007) defied the odds to become Canada’s most celebrated Jewish female dermatologist.

Born in Melville, Saskatchewan, to immigrant parents, Schachter set her sights on medicine early, despite her father’s hesitations about women in higher education. At age 15 years, she entered the University of Manitoba, where she was 1 of only 2 girls taking science courses, and observed that “physics professors did not like girls.” She persevered and in 1938 entered the University of Saskatchewan to complete preclinical training but was barred from final examinations because she was Jewish.

The “Jewish quota” in medical school admissions was a symptom of broader anti-Semitic tendencies across North America as well as economic and social interests. Because administrators sought to produce graduates that represented “mainstream America,” many qualified candidates were denied admission because of religion or race.

Despite this setback, Schachter found a place at the University of Toronto, although the dean doubted that she would be successful as he explained she had “two congenital anomalies”: being female and being Jewish. “All the girls sat in one row, all the Jews sat in another,” exclaimed Schachter, “In clinical years, groups were arranged in all women, or all Jews, or all Catholics. Discrimination was acceptable and that’s the way it was.” While advances had been made in female admissions at the end of the 19th century, attitudes disparaging women physicians as less capable than men, along with the 1910 Flexner report, which recommended the closure of many female medical colleges, halted further progress.

Schachter, however, was determined to be “a good doctor and not just a good woman doctor.” After graduating in 1943, she moved to New York to complete postgraduate work in dermatology at Columbia University. Here, Schachter marveled at the ability to work with women who could be professors, mothers, and health care practitioners.

Invigorated by this training, Schachter returned to Toronto in 1946 to begin her professional career at Women’s College Hospital (WCH), an institutional pioneer in women’s medical education. That year, she became the first woman to head an academic division of dermatology in Canada. She excelled in teaching and was appointed associate professor at the University of Toronto in 1965.

Schachter would go on to become the first female president of the Canadian Dermatology Association in 1978. In 1991, WCH honored her contributions to medicine and dermatology by establishing the Ricky Kanee Schachter Dermatology Center, an outpatient dermatology center.

Schachter blazed her own trail to achieve success. When she could find no mentors, she became one for herself and generations afterward: “If you are not getting the modeling, you become the modeling.”

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