The Equality and Human Rights Commission Annual Report published Autumn 2008 found that the proportion of women holding key positions in British life in 2007-8 had fallen in 12 out of the 25 categories surveyed in 2006. Our recent plateau in women trainee numbers at 18% belies the progress in approaches being achieved in some quarters by our role models. A career leaflet targeted to encourage women into Cardiology has been developed by Gemma Parry-Williams, ST1 in Wales, approved by BCS for circulation to members to use in recruitment. The 2008 HSTC Chairpersons’ survey being returned is finding some positive responses to the concept of professional leadership in promoting change in attitude to conventional gender roles.

My department’s pre-Christmas coffee morning welcomed three newborn babies seasonally appreciated. I was very proud that Olivia Grace Manning is the daughter of one of our current SpRs Nicky Edwards, whose maternity settlement was finalised in a powerful email circular with myself, HSTC Chair, and Associate Dean for Flexible Training reminding the HR department of legislation concerning rotating trainees. An autumn/winter baby may well have been conceived in a different Trust but total NHS service is taken into account in calculating maternity pay. As we plan the less than full time return timetable for May I am encouraged to hear that fellow women trainees are considering whether following this path might be appropriate for them.

Just before Christmas, Oliver Ormerod let me know that the SAC has asked him to lead for Flexible Training, an acknowledgement of the progress made by women trainees in the Oxford Deanery. Russell Smith as Quality Framework Lead for the SAC has just introduced the issue of women trainees with a first Training Review in the Northern Deanery, and will also make use of the data we have gathered. The Medical Women’s Federation has published a 2008 report on ‘Making Part-Time Work’, which I will also make available on our Women in UK Cardiology section in the Forum of the BCS website. Jean McEwan is organising a College day on Flexible Training on 21st April 2009.
Addressing the inequalities facing women in the workplace has been a focus in the lay press in recent weeks following the Equality and Human Rights Commission report, the prospect of a fairer world with Barack Obama in the White House, the banking crises, and the amazing furore over Rachida Dati’s return to the boardroom as a foreign minister within a few days of giving birth. Society must not criticise her unduly for rejoining briefly but strategically an important network for her, but accept the diversity of women as well as men, and honour and respect and support which should be available to all with a new family as needed.

Is Eagly and Carli’s life ‘labyrinth’ for women becoming more complex today? Have for instance modern media – internet and imagery – exaggerated the sexualisation of women and obsession with appearance, rather than appreciation of the wisdom attending greater maturity? Fortunately, there is a new activism based upon real progress with equality legislation. We must ensure that diversity impact assessment is implemented in all procedures. Despite the world recession, the progress already made in attitudes will support a balanced gender split within Medicine continuing, and young couples actually sharing increasingly the ambition of future careers.

A major challenge remains the still predominant male culture in the workplace, the persisting poor recognition of inappropriate language and behaviour which may be regarded as sexist. We must all counsel against this wherever we can in the spirit of a learning culture, and support younger colleagues who may be more sensitive to prejudiced comments than those of us hardened to them.

The final outcome of the 2008 HSTC Chair survey will be summarised in the 2009 BCS Annual Report and presented to the Women’s Network at the ASC. A spring newsletter will front a refreshed website prior to Conference. I look forward to your views at jane.flint@dgoh.nhs.uk, particularly any topics you would like to discuss on the Network agenda.

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