

Swedish Shatters any Vestige of a Glass Ceiling

John H. Vassall II, M.D.
*Chief Medical Officer
Swedish Medical Center*

A glass ceiling for women in medicine has existed throughout history. Lower acceptance rates at medical schools translated into lower graduation rates. Fewer practicing physicians created a smaller pool of eligible women for leadership positions and fewer mentors for women considering a medical career.

There has been considerable progress since the first woman graduated from a U.S. medical school in 1849, with women accounting for 48 percent of medical school graduates in 2011.¹ According to the American Medical Association's Women Physicians Conference, about 30 percent of practicing physicians are now women. Nevertheless, women remain underrepresented in the ranks of senior academic and hos-

pital leadership in many health-care organizations.

At Swedish Medical Center in Seattle, however, the glass ceiling has been shattered. In addition to Nancy Auer, M.D., an emergency-medicine physician serving as chairwoman of the Swedish Board of Directors, Swedish currently has three female chiefs of staff. This is not the first time a woman physician has been elected chief of staff at Swedish, but it is the first time women have filled

all three positions at the same time.

This unique benchmark has gone largely unnoticed at Swedish – a testament to the medical center's progressive nature and history of being at the forefront of positive change. Swedish – the largest nonprofit health-care organization in Greater Seattle – has a medical staff of nearly 3000 physicians. Established more than 100 years ago, Swedish now comprises five hospitals, two stand-alone emergency room/specialty centers, and a network of more than 100 specialty and primary-care clinics.

Dr. Auer has been a trailblazer at Swedish. Throughout previous tenures as chief of staff and chief medical officer, Dr. Auer was a role model for many women physicians. They were fortunate to witness firsthand her ability to juggle her personal and professional lives,



Left to right: Michelle J. Sinnett, M.D., chief of staff, Swedish/Edmonds; Lily K. Jung Henson, M.D., chief of staff, Swedish/Issaquah; and Mary B. Weiss, M.D., chief of staff, Swedish/Ballard, Swedish/Cherry Hill and Swedish/First Hill

while assuming demanding leadership responsibilities.

Lily Jung Henson, M.D., a neurologist and one of the three current chiefs of staff, acknowledges Dr. Auer as her mentor and role model.

“This very strong and articulate woman took a special interest in me when I first came to Swedish,” says Dr. Jung Henson. “She was our pioneer – a tremendous role model for all of us.”

Dr. Jung Henson is the first chief of staff at Swedish/Issaquah, which opened in late 2011. Rather than taking the helm of an existing medical staff, she has been responsible for unifying disparate groups. Dr. Jung Henson calls Issaquah a “laboratory” for best practices. She has used her cognitive skills, as well as her passion for patient care, to engage physicians in developing a medical-staff culture that embodies the essence of Issaquah.

In January 2011 – three months after Stevens Hospital in Edmonds, Wash., affiliated with Swedish – Michelle Sinnett, M.D., assumed the chief-of-staff position of the newly created Swedish/Edmonds campus. She knew physicians were supportive of affiliation, but also anxious to retain their independence. It fell on Dr. Sinnett to guide them through the challenges that naturally occur during mergers.

“It was comforting to meet the other Swedish chiefs of staff,” says Dr. Sinnett. “I was instantly reassured that we shared a vision to provide exceptional care for our patients.”

In addition to being chief of staff, “As a practicing physician I want-

ed things to work better,” says Dr. Weiss. “It was a natural step to accept leadership positions, so I could help improve the practice environment and patient care.”

Dr. Weiss’s leadership style blends outreach to seek input from those most affected by an issue with the desire to keep meetings lively and physicians engaged. Diplomacy and extensive leadership experience have made her an effective change agent.

At Swedish, these four exceptional women have replaced the glass ceiling with a higher bar for all physicians.

¹Association of American Medical Colleges, “U.S. Medical School Applicants and Students 1982-83 to 2011-12”

John Vassall, M.D., is a board-certified internist and chief medical officer for Swedish Medical Center in Seattle, Wash. As such, he serves as liaison between Swedish medical staff at five hospital campuses and multiple ambulatory-care centers and Swedish administration. He oversees patient safety, medical education, medical staff services, clinical effectiveness, regulatory compliance and other medical affairs matters.

Vassall graduated from the University of Washington School of Medicine, and completed residency training at Grady Memorial Hospital and Emory University Affiliated Hospitals in Atlanta.

He is on the boards of trustees for Washington’s hospital and medical associations, and authors a monthly patient safety column for the medical association.

“As a practicing physician I want-



Nancy Auer, M.D.
Chairwoman
Swedish Board of Directors

Dr. Sinnett has never been gender focused, yet she brings to her job some of the best characteristics commonly associated with women – setting clear expectations and consequences, and leading through gentle persuasion and a sense of fairness.

In Seattle, Mary Weiss, M.D., is completing her second year as chief of staff of the hospitals at Swedish’s Ballard, Cherry Hill and First Hill campuses. The collegiality and multispecialty collaborations she relies on and fosters as a family-medicine physician has earned her the confidence of her peers.

Reprinted with permission from the Washington Healthcare News. To learn more about the Washington Healthcare News visit wahcnews.com.