

The Doctor to Women Around the World

UBCMJ Staff

When Dr. Dorothy Shaw was first nominated to take the top post at the International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) and become its first female president, she was hesitant to take the job. “I wanted to learn more about where the organization is right now and where the real potential for change is,” said Dr. Shaw, also a former president of the Society of Obstetrics Gynecology of Canada (SOGC). “When I’m really serious about something, I commit and work really hard to see it to fruition.” Only after serving as a committee chair for several years did she feel comfortable to take on the prestigious position.

Behind Dr. Shaw’s modest, down-to-earth and affable image is a remarkable career and a driving passion as an advocate for women’s health. Well-known both at UBC and internationally, Dr. Shaw currently serves as a Senior Associate Dean, Professional Affairs and clinical professor in the UBC Faculty of Medicine. She currently leads as the Canada Spokesperson for the G8/G20 Partnership of Maternal Newborn and Child Health, and in 2008 was named one of Canada’s 100 Most Powerful Women.

Dr. Shaw knew she wanted to become a doctor at the young age of 8. Growing up in the north of England with her two brothers, she learned the value of hard work by helping at her family’s green grocer’s business during high school. “If you were to have a successful business, it required sacrifice and a significant commitment,” she says, and remembers how her parents had to pull long hours getting imported shipments from the docks in the morning.

In medical school at the University of Edinburgh, Dr. Shaw was not initially set on becoming an obstetrician/gynecologist. Her passion for the specialty started when she went to Montreal for her first clinical experience between second and third year of medical school. After another stint in San Francisco and later back in the United Kingdom, Dr. Shaw finally decided to settle on obstetrics/gynecology, and decided to make the move to Canada.

Dr. Shaw attributes her decision to move across the Atlantic as two-fold: her interest in the then-budding field of perinatology, which was being developed at UBC at the time by Dr. Molly Cowell, and the structural freedom available as a doctor in Canada. “As a woman in that specialty, it would have been very difficult to work through the [UK] system to reach the level of consultant [specialist]. More importantly, the way medicine was being practiced was very paternalistic in the UK, and I really wanted women to understand and learn what was happening to them as opposed to having things done to them, which was how it was. I knew that I would have the freedom



In this photo: Dr. Dorothy Shaw

to do that in Canada.”

Social justice issues also deterred Dr. Shaw from practicing in the United States. “I was unhappy about people being asked for their financial wherewithals before being treated at one of the hospitals I was working at – that disturbed me.”

Now Dr. Shaw channels her energies into women’s health advocacy. In her 4-year term as president of FIGO, Dr. Shaw chaired a number of initiatives to improve the status of women, including maternal and newborn health, prevention of unsafe abortion, cervical cancer prevention and control, and guidelines for sexual assault. She speaks of her time modestly, but is proud to consider her time as FIGO President as one of her biggest accomplishments.

A main motivation for Dr. Shaw during her FIGO presidency was her desire to help people understand that raising the status and health of women is a necessary precedent for economic development. According to the World Health Organization, 1600 women and more than 10,000 newborns die from preventable complications during childbirth each day, and most of this happens in the developing world. Dr. Shaw adds that the solutions for this are neither costly nor complex. Dr. Shaw is very open with her advice for medical students. “The challenges I have faced, even though they are difficult for a short period of time, have all turned out to be opportunities. It’s a question of not becoming bogged down or too concerned with how a particular situation might evolve, because medicine is such a wonderful career and there are so many doors. I have learned that on so many occasions that it’s been remarkable. I think that if you’re dedicated at work, your team supports you. And that helps everyone ultimately succeed.”

Dr. Shaw lives in Vancouver with her three daughters and her husband Marc, a financial executive. 