

# *Leading Ladies*

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By Nancy Honey

*Interviews by Hattie Garlick*

**Parveen Kumar:** *Consultant Physician and Gastroenterologist*

**1942: Born in Lahore, India**

**1966: Qualified in Medicine at St Bartholomew's Hospital Medical College, London before training as a gastroenterologist**

**1989: Changed the face of medical publishing by co-authoring Kumar and Clark's *Clinical Medicine* textbook, now used worldwide**

**1999: Given the first Asian Woman of the Year (Professional) award**

**2000: Made a CBE for services to Medicine**

**2006: Made president of the British Medical Association**

**2008: Received the Gold medal from the BMA for services to medicine and education**

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**Gradually, more and more women are coming into medicine.** The gender balance is now more in favour of women – about sixty per cent are entering medical schools each year. I think that's down to three things:

**First, medical students are interviewed at a time when boys are lanky and a little awkward** and perhaps not as well poised as teenage girls are.

**Second, it's a wonderful way of caring,** which I think is a natural thing for women to do. But those who want to care could also go into nursing, so I think that the women who choose medicine are the ones who want to challenge their intellectual capabilities as well. For me, it had the best of both worlds – I was very keen on science but also on the caring side.

**Lastly, young women's – and the public's - attitude towards professions have changed hugely during my career.** Now, it's the norm for women to enter professions. When I was a medical student there were very few girls and you were regarded as perhaps not as good as the men. So you just strove harder and you got to the top.

**We went through a period when women would come into medicine and they weren't prepared to give it the time that they needed to give it.** Often they were being 'pushed' by their schools, as it looked good for them at the University entry stage.

**Now, trainee doctors have to reduce their long hours** because of the European working time directive that followed. My daughter, who's a medic, too, hates being told to leave when you've just got to know the patient and their family. But the dedication that my generation had to give has passed over into a much better quality of life.

**In my time, medicine was all pervading in everything you did.** You did your job well and then family often came a close second, whereas I think now that your family should always come first.

**If you asked my family, they'd say that my work/life balance was badly organised** – I was always working. I don't think I had it right. Family was always very important to me, but if I had a really ill patient, I would be there whatever, as I knew they would understand.

**If anyone ever says the word 'duty' to me, or 'loyalty,' then I'm afraid I'm a sucker, I'll drop everything.** I never thought about my work in terms of getting to the top, it was about fulfilling my duty to each patient. And as a student it was about beating the boys.

**Is medicine becoming too feminised? I think the answer is yes.** The president of the Royal College of Physicians raised this idea at a time when I was the vice president. There is no doubt that men tend to push a lot more while women tend to resolve conflict by listening, which doesn't really help the profession in terms of getting what we want. I think, though, that women are starting to learn to be more forward and push their points of view.

**I hate it if I ever have to take a vote on a committee because that means you've failed** – you haven't managed to get everyone on board during the discussion. I've sat on and chaired a lot of committees and I've found that women are more capable, generally, of diffusing conflict. I'm sure men might disagree!

**My husband was also a doctor, and the way we managed our family life was to box and cox.** One of us was always there for the children, and that worked very well. You really have to have a very understanding partner if you want to make sure your family life is properly run and given enough importance.

**While I was writing and editing the textbook, sadly, I was away from the family a lot,** particularly at times when an edition was coming close to publication. I would get home in the evening, read to the kids, get them to bed, then iron their uniforms. Then my co-editor would arrive at the door at around eight, we'd work 'til about quarter to eleven, and then he and my husband would have a drink while I rushed upstairs to do my chores.

**The thing was that I wanted to make sure I was being a good housewife at the same time.** I look back now and think, *how can you be so stupid!* I nearly killed myself trying to do all that until I finally caved in and got a cleaner. I now tell youngsters, "Just do the things you're good at and leave the chores to other people so you can have more time with your family and still have a good job."

**There was a time when it was costing me more than I earned to go to work.** All my salary would go on the nanny and that doesn't appear to have changed – I am watching my daughter go through the same thing today.

My husband was actually paying me, topping up my bank balance so I could go to work!

**I had two daughters myself and now I have three grandsons**, and my goodness the boys are astoundingly different, really, from their first moments. They are constantly running around, shoving their fingers into things. One is five months old and he's already showing boy tendencies. I'm playing football all the time, which is a new job for me!