

From Rare to Common, Women Gain Numbers and Respect in Dermatology

One of Oregon's earliest female physicians and suffragette pioneers reportedly said she wished that she had been born a boy. It was probably because the door to her chosen profession – medicine – wasn't open to women. "I realized very early in life that a girl was hampered and hemmed in on all sides simply by the accident of sex," Bethenia Owens-Adair, M.D., (1840 to 1926) wrote in her autobiography. (www.oregonencyclopedia.org/entry/view/bethenia_owens_adair_1840_1926/)

A century later, in 1977, another prominent female physician experienced discrimination 20th-century style. OHSU dermatology then-assistant professor Storrs, was asked to leave a

gathering of prominent physicians at Portland's exclusive and then all-male Arlington Club because of her gender. "It was a true epiphany," she says. "I couldn't be prominent because I didn't have the right anatomy. I had a great sense of the irrationality of segregation, of discrimination."

Fortunately for women born more recently, Owens-Adair, Storrs and others, including male proponents of women's rights, cleared the way for aspiring female physicians. The short burst of fame Storrs received in the local media after the Arlington snub became public was nothing compared to the fire the incident ignited within her. From that point, she worked to ensure that other women didn't suffer the same insult.

In dermatology, female residents have outnumbered male residents in the United States since 1994, including at OHSU. Women now represent 20 percent of America's 16,000 practicing dermatologists.

Unlike Owens-Adair, Storrs had female role models, including her own mother who, along with her father, graduated from Oregon's medical school and practiced family medicine in Spokane, Wash. After graduation from Cornell Medical College in New York City in 1964, Storrs moved to Portland for an internship at Good Samaritan Hospital. An early mentor, Ted Kingery, arranged for her to meet Lobitz, then chairman, who offered her a residency position

Right: Frances Storrs' gender was an exception in the mid 1960s, as evidenced by this gathering of the residents at a local Chinese restaurant. According to Storrs, Thomas Saunders (on left looking at camera) treated the residents to dinner at this restaurant frequently.

Opposite page: Forty years later in 2006, the gender mix shows the female trend that has developed; of the 12 residents, seven are female.





in 1965. He became her lifelong friend, mentor and supporter.

Although Storrs was the second female resident, she was the first female resident to complete all of her training in the department. Medical school catalogs reveal that Marge Lerner, who came to Oregon with her husband, Aaron Lerner, completed her final year of residency in 1953. She was a clinical instructor in 1954. Like Storrs, she suffered gender discrimination: the Oregon Dermatology Society denied her membership in the 1950s because she was a woman, according to Kingery.

Also in 1965, a female scientist who primarily worked with Montagna, at the Oregon Regional (now National) Primate Research Center received a dermatology appointment. Funan Hu, M.D., Ph.D., was a Chinese-trained dermatopathologist who had worked previously with dermatology “lion” Clarence Livingood, M.D., at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit. Although Hu didn’t practice clinically in Oregon, she taught residents about dermatopathology and collaborated on research projects (including a 1980 paper on “yellow mutant albinism” with Hanifin), in addition to her pigment and melanocytes work with Montagna.

After Storrs completed her residency in 1968, “Fran,” as she is affectionately known, joined the faculty as an instructor. Her acceptance into the program was a monumental shift in thinking for the dominant male faculty.

Dobson, a prominent dermatologist who was hired by Lobitz to lead the department’s research efforts in 1961 and who stayed through 1972, says the faculty had a serious debate about whether to allow a woman to join their ranks. Until then, he says, dermatology was “basically a men’s club.”

“We debated a long time,” Dobson recalls. “Wally had misgivings, and I had concerns, and finally we decided that Fran would be OK.”

Under the tutelage of Suskind, a faculty member from 1963 to 1968, Storrs took responsibility for the Contact Dermatitis Clinic, which would be her clinical and research passion. Over the next 40 years, she traveled the world as a sought-after speaker and expert. She is credited with discovering many new workplace allergens and treatments.

Storrs became active in the American Civil Liberties Union and pressed for equal pay for women at the medical school, as she had experienced pay discrimination first hand. She helped launch a national mentoring program in the Women’s Dermatologic Society that pairs men with women and women with either gender mentors. “It’s an incredibly successful program,” says Storrs, now professor emerita. “I’m more proud of the mentorship program than of anything I’ve ever done.” The society honored her with its first mentorship award in 2003, recognizing her influence on “legions of dermatologists, other physicians, medical students and undergraduates.”

Right: The first Frances J. Storrs, M.D., Medical Dermatology Lectureship was held in 2009, with Alexa Boer Kimball as its keynote speaker. From left: residents Gretchen Vanderbeek, Karen Minzer-Conzetti, Jeff North, Joseph Sobanko (surgical fellow), Anisha Patel, Kimball, Storrs, Farnaz Fakhari, Justin Leitenberger, Samuel Hopkins, Brooke Sikora.

Opposite page: Research Director Molly Kulesz-Martin (left) was recruited in 1999 to enhance the department's research efforts. Rebecca Bridges (right), research assistant

Below: Kulesz-Martin shines as a mentor in 2008 for four female graduates: Gretchen Vanderbeek, Jodi Johnson, Jayme Gallegos and Sally El-Hizawi



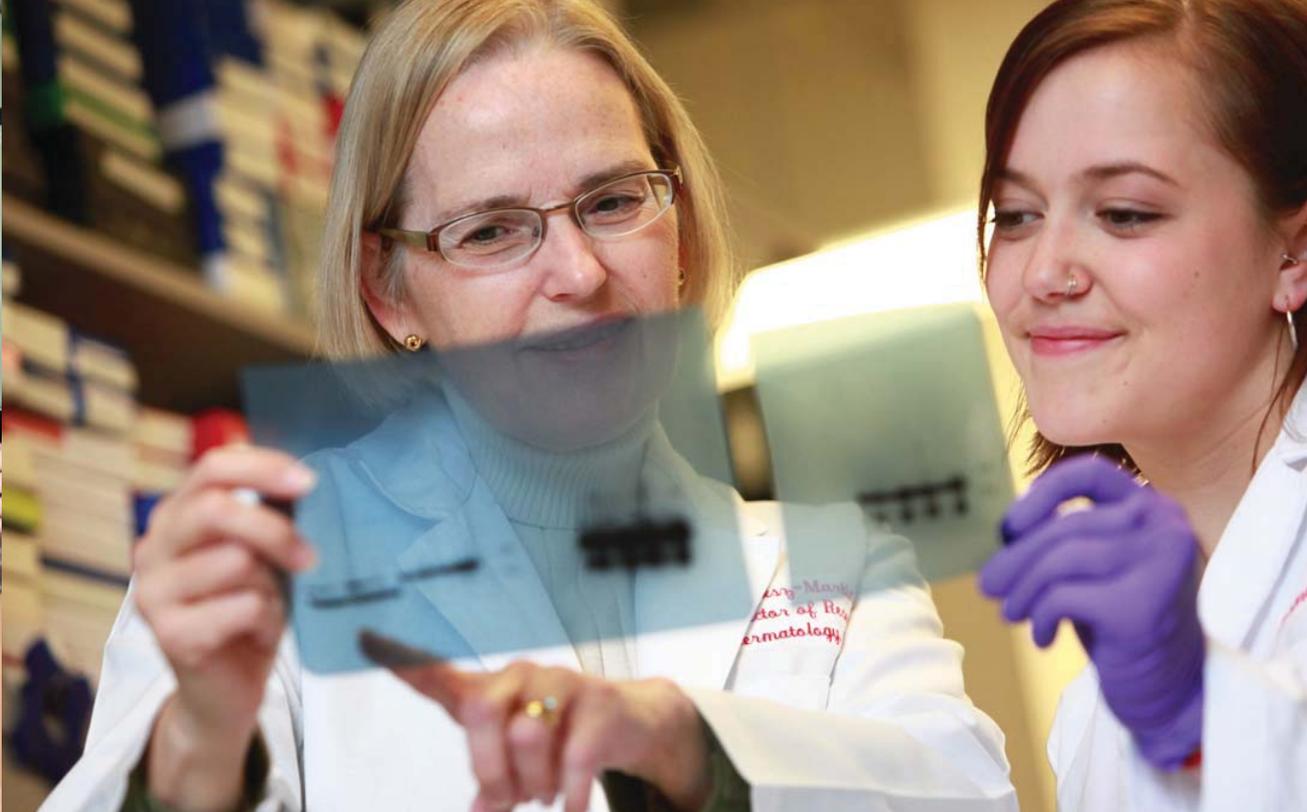
Other honors include the American Academy of Dermatology's Master Dermatologist Award, the City Club of Portland's Citizen of the Year 2001, the American Contact Dermatitis Society's Alexander Fisher Lectureship Award and the AAD's highest honor, the Gold Medal.

Sen. Ron Wyden nominated her as a "local legend" – a companion gallery to the National Library of Medicine's Changing Face of Medicine: Celebrating America's Women Physicians exhibition. In 2008, to formally recognize its very own legend, the department and the Storrs Endowment Committee of alumni Patricia Norris, M.D., Baker, Russell, along with James Baker, M.D., created the Frances J. Storrs, M.D. Dermatology Endowed Fund with a goal of endowing a medical dermatology professorship

in Storr's name. It is now a lectureship and when fully funded will be the first named professorship in the department. In 2009, there was only one other female-named professorship in the country.

Storrs broke the ice, but 21 years passed before the next female dermatologist joined the faculty. In 1989, Chairman Parker hired Lynne Morrison, M.D., a 1986 graduate, for her expertise in immunodermatology. Another decade passed before Molly Kulesz-Martin, Ph.D., was hired. She accepted the role of research director in 1999.

In 2001, Theresa Schroeder Devere, M.D., joined the faculty and flourished, taking on three top leadership positions during her tenure until she left in 2010: residency director, medical dermatology director and patient care director for the Center of Excellence for Psoriasis and



Psoriatic Arthritis. Melissa Wong, Ph.D., who also has an appointment in the Department of Cell and Developmental Biology, added basic research strength, coming to department in 2001.

As additional women have been hired, the “firsts” continue to mount. In 2004, Susan Tofte, R.N., F.N.P., earned a faculty assistant professor appointment. Since 1985, Tofte had played an integral role in the department’s clinical research efforts, and after she earned her nurse practitioner degree, it was a natural progression to focus her clinical efforts in dermatology. As the department’s first non-physician provider, Tofte has paved the way not only in the department, but also within dermatology. In the past five years, non-physician provider growth in dermatology has increased faster than in any other specialty.

In 2008, the department hired its first physician assistant, Kim Biggs Sanders, P.A.-C.

Each new hire brings expertise in another subspecialty area. In 2006 the first female surgeon, Anna Bar, M.D., a 2005 graduate, was hired. She was followed by the first female pediatric dermatologist, Dawn Siegel, M.D., who came in 2007 fresh from her training at University of California, San Francisco.

Of the current 26 faculty members, women now hold 11 positions, with four of the last six positions filled by women. In terms of residents, the swing is best demonstrated by the actual numbers. Of the 207 overall residents who have been in the OHSU program, 69 have been female (33 percent.)

However, the last ten years show the shift that

has occurred – of the 44 residents who have been trained in the department, 27 are female (61 percent). In other universities, women are department heads, are authors of popular textbooks on dermatology and head national organizations. Oregon’s own Diane Baker was the second female president of the American Academy of Dermatology, serving in 2008.

“Women dermatologists in their residency training at OHSU, on the faculty and in the community in Oregon have been fortunate enough to be mentored and taught not only by Fran Storrs, but also by male leaders like Jon Hanifin and Neil Swanson,” says Baker.

And if Owens-Adair were alive today, she’d be pleased to see the rush of women through the open doors of medicine.