

Integration: A Practical Approach to Balancing the Demands of Work and Family

BY RUTH WILLIAMS, MD



Allergan recognizes the important role women eye care practitioners play within the ophthalmic and optometric communities. Visionary Insights for Eye Care Women—VIEW—is a platform established by Allergan that is dedicated to supporting and promoting women optometrists and ophthalmologists. This article marks the second in a series that will appear in *Cataract & Refractive Surgery Today*, its sister publication, *Advanced Ocular Care*, and its online publication, *MillennialEYE* (www.millennialeye.com).

AS A PROFESSIONAL WOMAN, WHAT DOES “WORK/LIFE BALANCE” MEAN TO YOU?

People often ask me, “How do you do everything?” Well, everyone I know juggles a lot of responsibility, and it’s a matter of making choices. I think one of the biggest challenges is prioritizing: choosing what matters most to us and our families. Then, we must be able to accept these choices without guilt or regret. Therefore, I think the second greatest challenge to professional women is to be willing to release certain expectations freely. One of my favorite lines is, “I don’t have time for guilt.” It is a complete waste of time.

HOW DO YOU PERSONALLY BALANCE WORK AND FAMILY—PROBABLY THE TWO BIGGEST DEMANDS IN MANY WOMEN’S LIVES?

First, we women must realize that there are different stages in life during which our priorities might be different. It is important to accept that we do not have to do everything perfectly; our kids are going to be fine if we do not meet every expectation. Likewise, our careers will not crumble if we miss a meeting or forget a conference call. We should strive to do the best we can and let the rest go without guilt. As an example: I was supposed to bring a dessert for my son’s lacrosse team, which was having a fundraiser luncheon. I was too busy to make something, and I thought I would just buy a chocolate cake from the local shop and drop it off. I forgot—I was the one mother who didn’t show up with a dessert. When I remembered, my knee-jerk reaction was to feel guilty. And then I thought, “No, I’m not going to feel bad, they have plenty of desserts and they can live without it. I’ll do it next time.” I gave myself permission to be imperfect. Feeling guilty is a choice.

WHAT ARE SOME STRATEGIES THAT HELP YOU JUGGLE RESPONSIBILITIES?

Another one of my favorite sayings is, “No one cares who does the laundry.” Delegate as many tasks as possible—this is a lesson I wish I had learned early in my motherhood career. For example, at one time, I thought I “should” do my own family’s laundry. But when I finally assigned that chore to someone else, I found more time to relax and hang out with my kids. I finally figured out that I do not need to come home and work!

Recently, somebody asked me if I still have a nanny now that my kids are in their teens. My response was that I have a nanny for me. When I walk out the door, someone walks in and does the dishes, sets the table, runs the errands, takes care of the dogs, and all of the household chores. When I get home, I literally plop on the sofa and hang out with my kids. I used to walk in the door and scramble to fix dinner, etc., because I thought that was part of being a good mother. Now I have realized

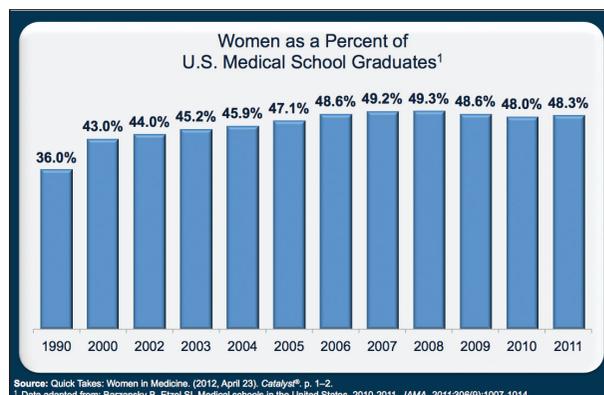


Figure 1. In general, the number of female medical school graduates has been slowly but steadily increasing since 2000.

that it is more important for me to have time with my kids before they are old enough to leave the house. I think the most important thing for professional women is to spend quality time with their children, meaning, give ourselves the space to enjoy time with our children without distractions.

Of course, the stages of childrearing vary. When kids are toddlers, it is relatively easy to keep them on a schedule. It gets a little more complicated as they enter grade school and become involved in endless activities, but then by high school they are largely self-sufficient. One of the advantages of working in the healthcare field is that it is generally more flexible in terms of working hours. I was able to scale back my working hours when my kids were little, and ramp those hours back up as they have grown. I certainly appreciate having had that flexibility, which is not possible in all fields (Figures 1 and 2).

I also believe that women physicians should never say they work part-time, because caring for patients is always a full-time responsibility. We still have to make our patient calls, get our continuing education, pay our malpractice insurance—and we have to be just as good as anybody else or better. “Part-time” is not a fair representation of the hours we put in, even if we are seeing patients 2 or 3 days per week.

HOW HAVE YOU HANDLED TRAVELING FOR WORK VERSUS CARING FOR A FAMILY?

I have always travelled. Kids are fine without their mothers for short periods of time, and I think it was great that my kids got weekends alone with their dad. If we women are the go-to parent when we are at home, I think it can be very healthy for our husbands and kids if we abandon that role once in a while. Also, from the age of 5 up until they entered high school, I often took my kids out of school so they could travel with me.

I think talking about balance is the wrong concept. That word implies that to give time and attention to one, you have to take away from the other, and that there is some magical formula where you do enough for each aspect of your life, and everything works out okay. In my opinion, this is a gross oversimplification. It is more realistic and functional to see work and family as an interplay, not as competing forces. Just as I have taken

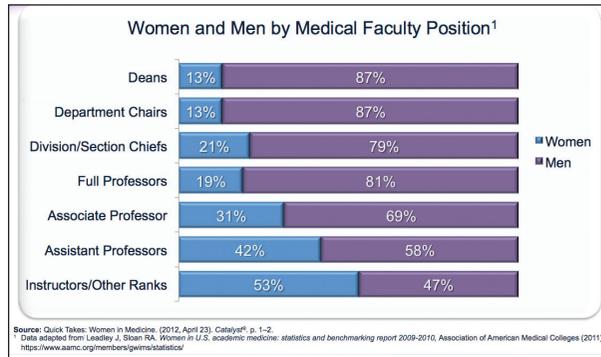


Figure 2. Women still need to close the gender gap for holding academic positions within medicine in the U.S.

my kids on work trips, I also bring my work home when necessary to make sure it gets done. In this busy modern world, it is not about choosing between either/or, but making room for both/and. Then, when we are feeling stress in one area of our life, we can draw strength and satisfaction from another area.

CULTURALLY, HOW CAN WE ENABLE MORE WOMEN TO PURSUE DREAMS OF HAVING BOTH CHILDREN AND A CAREER?

This is a complicated issue. First, we have to respect the diversity of human beings and the diversity of choice. Having choices is difficult, but it is also a privilege that our grandmothers and many of our mothers did not have. Intrinsic to the freedom of choice is responsibility, and the courage to say yes to one thing and no to another. Foremost, we must foster enormous respect for women who make different choices. There are no winners in the so-called mommy wars. Second, we must release ourselves from the pressures and expectations of traditional gender roles. Men typically do not fret over the choice between being homeroom dad versus morning conference calls, and because most families nowadays need two incomes, more domestic responsibilities will need to be shared. ■

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