**BY TRISTAN BRONCA**

**The work-life imbalance**

Why are female doctors more likely to be burned out by responsibilities at home?

Even when Dr. Vivica Jane was on vacation, she was never really on vacation. Until about three years ago, the 57-year-old family doctor was married to an ER doctor. Both of them were workaholics. Well, actually, both of them were workaholics until they had kids.

“My work schedule revolved around the children’s needs,” she said. “I was always home promptly at 5:30 to relieve the nanny, but my husband was rarely home and when he was, he was usually preoccupied or exhausted.” She said her husband would book off weekends, sometimes entire weeks, for sports holidays without the family. “When the family was dragged along, for wind-surfing trips for example, our needs were not considered at all,” she said. She would be left alone for hours at a time on a remote windswept beach without running water or shelter, her two small children in tow.

For the sake of her own health, Dr. Jane did manage to carve out some time to herself—a run thrice weekly for just half an hour, but it seemed out of proportion to what she sacrificed. She gave up obstetrics, something she loved, because her husband was often away on more lucrative ER shifts. She gave up medical volunteer work, in favour of the Scouts, to spend more precious time with her kids. She would have even gone part-time in her family practice had she been able to find another doctor to share it with.

Still, despite her efforts, she said her children suffered: one of them from attention deficit disorder, the other from anorexia. Dr. Jane pointed out that both are psychological conditions related to parental absence.

“I think my generation was sold a bill of goods when we were told that we can have it all, career and family, and everything would be great,” she said. “But something always suffers.”

**Mother’s guilt and cultural mores**

Dr. Vivica Jane is a pseudonym but her story belongs to a real physician. And while her parental travails may seem extreme by modern standards, they aren’t uncommon.

In a Medical Post survey of over 400 doctors, nearly half strongly agreed they were more likely to feel burned out because of responsibilities outside of work compared with colleagues of the opposite sex. But when you broke that up by gender, just 11% of men said the same, compared to nearly 60% of women.

In emailed correspondences, dozens of doctors—mothers, most of them—provided a number of compelling examples of the cultural expectations placed on mothers. Those mothers who also happen to be physicians never seemed to get a pass because of their profession.

“I tend to be responsible for organizing and running our household,” said Dr. Crystal Chettle, the chief of anesthesiology at Brantford General Hospital in Ontario, “whereas (my husband) tends to be my worker bee.” She explained that her husband does cook and clean, but he tends “not to look forward more than a day or two” whereas females have more sense and generally wish to work at a better pace.”

**No simple fix**

Many of the female doctors who contacted the Medical Post expected their male colleagues to disagree with them. “Do colleagues recognize the difficulties we put up with?” Some, for sure,” said Dr. Linda Stegben, a family doctor in St. John, N.B. “But other moms do, no question.”

In her master’s thesis, which explores misogyny in surgery, Dr. Kimberley Meathrel, a plastic surgeon in Kingston, Ont., concluded that, generally, the older generation of male physicians—who tend to be in charge of things now—“can’t appreciate the difficulties female doctors have in maintaining a satisfactory work-life balance. These doctors often had stay-at-home wives or wives who took time away from work, who did all the child care and ran the home while they focused on their practice.”

And while that is beginning to change—while it’s no longer unheard-of for a father to assume a domestic role while a female physician focuses on work—these cultural biases are deeply rooted. Our survey found that today, even as they take time away from practice and make professional sacrifices, about 90% of female doctors still find it particularly difficult to balance work and life. Just under 50% of their male colleagues said the same.

It’s a problem that defies a simple fix. According to Dr. Lorna Gillen, a family doctor in Thunder Bay, Ont., “men need the freedom to work less and to have time to do more for their families outside of work.”

“Women need the reverse.” MP