

# Women surgeons excel

by Carolyn Smith

"We see ourselves as heroes too, we just don't talk about it," one woman surgeon explained to Joan Cassell during Cassell's fieldwork with surgeons in American hospitals.

Dr. Cassell spoke on "Doing Gender/Doing Fieldwork: Women Surgeons in a Man's Profession" as part of the Distinguished Guest Lecture Series sponsored by the School of Resource and Environmental Studies. About thirty people attended the lecture on November 12, in which Cassell described her research into the differences between men and women surgeons.

In her ten years of fieldwork, Cassell observed that male surgeons take the idea of the 'war on disease' very seriously. They use terms like 'search and destroy mission' unselfconsciously when describing their work. In the eighties, she said, the atmosphere of operating theatres was very male and macho, with male surgeons comparing themselves to heroic test pilots.

Women must be extraordinary to become surgeons, but what happens when they gain entrance into 'the men's house'?

Cassell found that women surgeons appear to confirm several theorists' expectations in that they are often more sensitive, compassionate and empathic, and more likely to hold a patient's hand than are male surgeons. However, in some cases they are not significantly different from male surgeons, or they are only different from male surgeons some of the time.

These observations led Cassell to abandon her 'gender difference' approach in favour of a 'doing gender'

approach to understanding her observations. This allowed her to see how the surroundings in the masculine world of surgery might cause women to behave differently from men.

Cassell believes that feminine expectations for women do not disappear when women acquire professional status — if anything, she says, they become more pronounced. For example, nurses will tolerate and even improve their performance when a male surgeon throws a 'fit'. However, they will slow down and even report a female surgeon for the same behaviour. This forces women surgeons to be polite, or to become responsible for jeopardizing the quality of patient care.

Male surgeons will confide in women surgeons about their personal lives, but would never confide personal details to male colleagues. Similarly, women nurses expect women surgeons to ask about their personal lives in a way that is not expected of male surgeons. Both situations are examples of attempts by colleagues to elicit the feminine quality of sympathy.

"Women surgeons cannot afford not to be different," says Cassell. "Women surgeons learn to use feminine behaviours to achieve results, to get where

they want to go with relative comfort and ease."

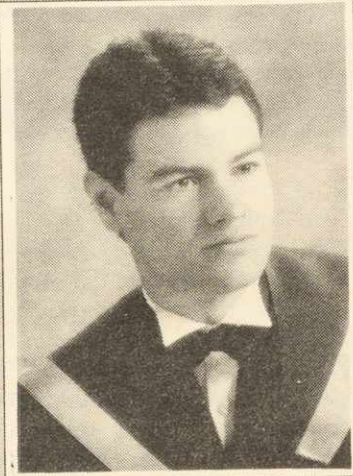
Class and race are also important factors in the lives of women surgeons. Cassell said she has met only two black women surgeons, and no women surgeons from a working-class background. It appears that for women to become surgeons, they must already be privileged in society. Men have more mobility and can move more easily from a working-class background to the upper-middle class world of surgery.

Audience reaction to Joan Cassell's talk was favourable. "I thought it was exciting, especially her shift from gender difference to doing gender," said Brenda Beagan, a lecturer in the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology. "I'm particularly interested in what she said about eliciting, encouraging and enforcing gender-appropriate behaviour. It makes sense in terms of my life and my research."

The work presented in this discussion was preliminary, and has not yet been published. Joan Cassell's prior work includes *Expected Miracles: Surgeons at Work*, *Children in the Field: Anthropological Experiences*, and *A Group Called Women: Sisterhood and Symbolism in the Feminist Movement*.

The November 25 issue of the Dalhousie Gazette will have a **special supplement** to honour the Week of Reflection.. We are encouraging both women and men to submit poetry, creative writing, opinions, personal reflections, all materials relating to women's issues to the Gazette office, room 312 of the SUB.

The deadline is **Friday, November 19**, for all submissions. Please contribute and help intensify the voices demanding a society where all women are respected.



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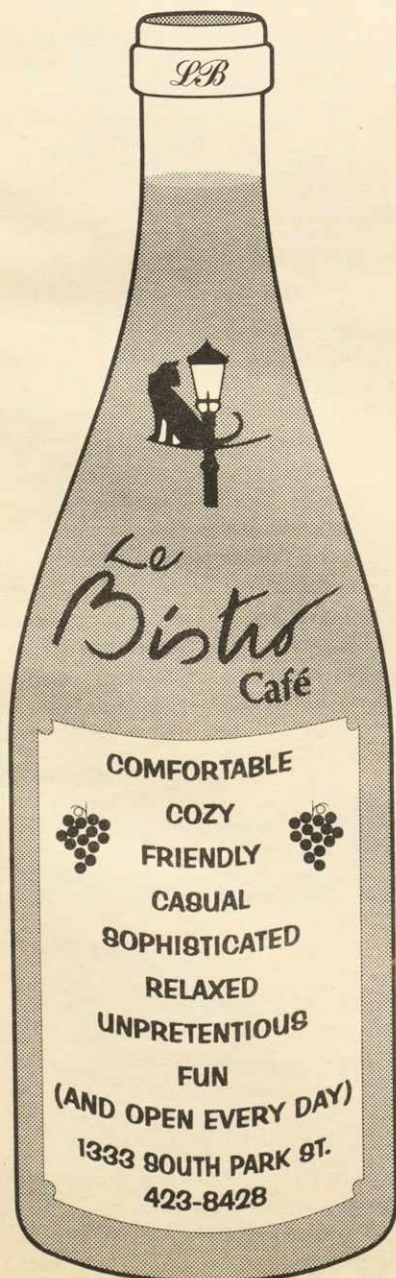
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**Deadline Noon, Thursday, November 25. No Exceptions.**