



Inspirational Women in Surgery: Professor Wendy Brown, Australia

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Across an academic landscape dominated by male surgeons in the early 2000s, Wendy Brown represented a beacon of hope for aspiring female academic surgeons. She spoke at national and international meetings with poise and authority, and she held positions of leadership in both hospital and university environments. Perhaps more importantly, Wendy was (and is) an empathetic and approachable colleague who quickly became an important role model.

Professor Brown was born in Melbourne, Australia, but lived a largely nomadic childhood with time spent in Brisbane, Sydney, New Zealand, and Singapore. She had no exposure to medicine as a child but, at the age of 13, heard a missionary couple speak about their work in Africa.

This sowed the seed of medicine and, after her final year in a Victorian boarding school, Professor Brown was accepted to medical school.

Professor Brown initially discounted the possibility of becoming a surgeon due to a lack of worthy role models. But during internship, she worked under Professor Paul O'Brien, a pioneer of bariatric surgery, as well as Professor John Masterton, Professor Chris Christophi and Mr Simon Woods, each of whom took time to promote surgery as a rewarding career. Professor Brown spent more time in surgical rotations and quickly became hooked. Professor O'Brien, in particular, became an influential mentor in Professor Brown's development by encouraging her to complete a PhD, and introducing her to the academic rigor of well-designed studies in bariatric surgery [1, 2]. Professor Brown went on to complete a fellowship in Brisbane under the supervision of two other pioneers of laparoscopic surgery in Australia—Professor Mark Smithers and Professor David Gotley. They too showed her that it was possible to combine academic and surgical excellence, while maintaining a kind and unassuming demeanor.

Professor Brown is the *first* woman to hold both the position of Chair of the Monash University Department of Surgery at Alfred Health, along with Program Director of Surgical Services Alfred Health (Melbourne, Australia). She is the Past President of both the Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand Gastric and Oesophageal Surgery Association and the Obesity Surgery Society of Australia and New Zealand, and she is the *first* and only woman to be awarded the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons' John Mitchell Crouch Scholarship for Research Excellence. Perhaps one of Professor Brown's most important contributions to date has been the establishment of the Australian and New Zealand Bariatric Surgery Registry. This registry collects data from 212 surgeons working at 143 sites and

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includes longitudinal data on more than 150,000 bariatric surgery patients over 10 years. This mature database will drive best practice and improve patient outcomes in this vulnerable group for years to come [3].

When asked about challenges in her career, Professor Brown does not include surgery on that list! Professor Brown was drawn to upper gastrointestinal surgery to combine both the treatment of aggressive cancers with the equally demanding, yet less morbid, surgical management of benign work (namely, obesity and reflux). The difficulties Professor Brown describes are those associated with holding senior leadership roles, where she is often the only woman on professional retreats or in program director meetings. It is here that she sometimes feels excluded and believes more mentorship and emerging leadership training would not go amiss.

Professor Brown's message to other surgeons? If one recognizes potential in a medical student or resident to become a good surgeon, embrace any opportunity to encourage them regardless of gender or ethnicity. It may just be what is needed. Professor Brown is indeed an inspirational woman in surgery, and one with whom I am so lucky to have crossed paths!

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author is a consultant for Ferronova and has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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