



Inspirational Women in Surgery: Dr Philippa Mercer, a Leader and Advocate for Equity in Surgery in New Zealand

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Dr Philippa Mercer is a prominent surgeon in Aotearoa New Zealand who has inspired many by her example. Graduating as a medical doctor in 1983 she considered surgical training at a time when female surgeons were very uncommon. The career path for a mother, in particular, was discouraging and it is a tribute to Dr Mercer and others of her time that we now have a more diverse surgical workforce. She completed her Fellowship in General Surgery in 1990 and continued her specialist training in Ashford, Kent in the United Kingdom followed by a role as a Special Lecturer in Surgery for two years at the University College Dublin in Ireland. Dr Mercer then gained further experience in Endocrine and Oncology Surgery at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Centre in New York with a leader in that field Professor Murray Brennan in 1993 before

returning as the first female General Surgery consultant at Christchurch Hospital in Aotearoa New Zealand.

The impact she has had on female trainees is described by Dr Jessica Vlok (who has worked with Dr Mercer) as follows “Philippa Mercer is an inspirational woman surgeon and has helped me, and many others, on the path through surgical training. Not very long ago, becoming a surgeon as both a female and a mother was almost impossible. As a result of her hard work and dedication to surgery, Philippa has managed to break down numerous barriers that in the past prevented women from entering surgical training. She is a role model to many by demonstrating that women can have a fulfilling career in surgery and that surgery and motherhood are not mutually exclusive”.

Dr Mercer spent six years as supervisor of New Zealand General Surgery training while a member of the New Zealand Association of General Surgeons Board from 2006 until 2018. Her time included a role as Vice President from 2012 until 2014 and then as President until 2016. On 1 July 2021, Dr Mercer became the Chair for the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS) New Zealand National Board. She is strongly committed to correcting all inequalities in health care and at the time stated “The inequitable health outcomes for Māori are totally unacceptable. RACS is committed to health equity and I will fully support the mahi (work) that is under way to make our surgical profession in Aotearoa/New Zealand more culturally competent and safe. Through Te Rautaki Māori, our recently adopted Māori health strategy, I’m confident that we can make real progress in terms of attracting more Māori into surgical careers and equally importantly,

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building a culturally safe surgical work force so all patients receive the care they deserve”. The role of the College is important to her “as a national committee we are currently focusing on RACS recognition of the importance of the Treaty of Waitangi to healthcare delivery for Māori along with increasing understanding and awareness of respect, surgeons’ wellbeing, discrimination, and harassment within the profession”.

Teaching others has always been a top priority and she has encouraged surgical learning with her engagement in research such as the recent publication in the *World Journal of Surgery* she co-authored [1]. Dr Mercer has also contributed to the literature on thyroid malignancies and adrenal surgery [2, 3]. She has said “Surgical Trainees and newly qualified surgeons can gain so much from their experienced colleagues and it’s very satisfying for those who are mentoring to be able to give back some of the

skills and knowledge they have acquired during their career”.

References

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