

Sisterhood Is Forever: The Women's Anthology for a New Millennium

edited by Robin Morgan

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Diagnosis and Prognosis: Women Physicians and Women's Health

WENDY CHAVKIN, M.D., M.P.H.

I HAD NEVER GIVEN a thought to medical school until I was almost finished with college. Two factors shifted my attention toward medicine. The major factor was involvement with the women's health movement of the early 1970s,¹ particularly the focus on contraception and abortion. Control of one's reproductive life seemed so pivotal for every woman, and the constraints so outraged me that I began to think becoming an obstetrician-gynecologist would be a useful political contribution. The second motivator was, frankly, that I liked the thought of doing something women weren't expected to do.

Thirty years have passed. Contraception and abortion rights are still critical flashpoints around the world, including here in the United States. It is, however, pretty mainstream to be an American woman in medicine, or—let me be more precise—to be a white, middle-class woman in *certain* fields of medicine.

There have been dramatic changes in the gender composition of U.S. medical students over these past three decades. At the time I got my wild idea, in the early '70s, women constituted about 10 percent of the medical-student body; by the time I graduated, more than 25 percent; nowadays, almost half: 48 percent. Whereas 80 percent of female medical students were white in my day, that majority has declined to less