

Highlights of the 2019 Canadian Conference on Physician Leadership

by Pat Rich, Ottawa writer and editor

The annual Canadian Conference on Physician Leadership (CCPL) was held in Montréal on April 26-27, with the theme “Diversity, Inclusion & Engagement: The Leadership Challenge.” About 360 delegates attended the meeting.

Outgoing Canadian Society of Physician Leaders (CSPL) president, Dr. Becky Temple, opened the meeting. In her remarks, she noted that starting this year the conference will be hosted solely by the CSPL. The Canadian Medical Association and Joule Inc. will no longer be co-hosting the meeting.

Two of the plenary addresses, a panel, and several breakout sessions focused on the main theme of the meeting.

- Speaking on the first day, Dr. Gurdeep Parhar, executive associate dean and clinical professor, Faculty of Medicine, University of British Columbia presented data showing how unconscious biases and stereotyping continue to hamper women physicians and physicians of colour. Dr. Parhar gave delegates practical tips on how to acknowledge and deal with these forms of bias.
- As a complementary presentation on the second day, Dr. Maydianne Andrade (PhD), vice-dean of faculty affairs and equity, University of Toronto, also addressed unconscious bias citing numerous studies showing how this exists in academia and medicine. She said that, while most Canadian organizations having equity statements, there is hard evidence that inequities continue to exist. Dr. Andrade provided practical tips on how to overcome bias when assessing other individuals for jobs or promotions and urged delegates to rigorously monitor their judgements and base them on outcomes.
- At the end of the first day, a panel discussion chaired by Dr. Dietrich Furstenburg, Northern Interior rural medical director, Quesnel, BC, focused on the personal medical leadership journeys of four outstanding physicians. Dr. May Cohen, a pioneer on gender issues and leading female physician, and Dr. Nadine Caron, Canada’s first Indigenous general surgeon, both received standing ovations following their presentations. They shared the podium with Dr. Henry Annan, a black Canadian and immediate past-president of the Canadian Federation of Medical Students, and Dr. Michael Negraeff, a pain specialist and disabled physician. Each gave his personal stories about dealing with discrimination and taking on leadership roles.
- A breakout session held twice during the second day and coordinated by the Canadian Medical Association also featured several outstanding speakers delivering

inspirational messages about equity and diversity in medicine. CMA President Dr. Gigi Osler talked about how she is using her presidency to advance inclusiveness, noting that being an advocate in this area is “not for the faint of heart.” Her message was reinforced by fellow panelist, Chika Stacy Oriuwa who discussed her experiences as the only black student in a class of 259 at the University of Toronto. “Advocacy is a form of self-preservation,” said Oriuwa, who is now in second year and continuing to advocate for the rights of black medical students despite facing overt racism.

- Several speakers — backed up by copious statistics — noted the ongoing challenges for female physicians to be represented in leadership roles in medicine in Canada despite making up almost half of the workforce. The most in-depth discussion of this at the conference came during a session co-hosted by Ottawa psychiatrist Dr. Mamta Gautam and Dr. Dennis Kendel, leadership coach and mentor from Saskatchewan. They focused on how male physicians can better support their female colleagues to help them gain more advancement. “Our responsibility includes opening doors and removing roadblocks so others can grow, and providing sponsorship,” said Dr. Kendel.

The opening speaker at the conference was Dr. Linda Duxbury (PhD), professor at the Sprott School of Business, Carleton University, Ottawa who was speaking at the conference for the third time. Dr. Duxbury provided an updated overview of the changing demographics of the Canadian population, a detailed snapshot of the various generations making up that population, and the implications of these changes for physicians and the health care system.

She noted just how different physicians are from the general workforce. “Women physicians work an average of 48.1 hours/week. In no other sector would this be considered part-time,” she said. She said the health care system takes advantage of the willingness of physicians to work excessive hours and/or to provide their time for free at the expense of their own well-being. She urged physician leaders to fight back against governments who see physician services as an expense rather than as a valuable resource.

The other plenary speaker at the conference was Dr. Brian Goldman, an emergency physician, the host of the popular CBC radio show “White Coat Black Art,” and most recently author of *The Power of Kindness: Why Empathy Is Essential in Everyday Life*. Dr. Goldman discussed his recent journey to learn more about empathy and kindness and also discussed why it can be challenging for physicians to show empathy and kindness in the work they do.

An awards ceremony at the conference recognized the 18 physicians who became Canadian Certified Physician Executives in the past year as well as this year’s winner of the CSPL Excellence in Medical Leadership (Chris Carruthers) Award, Dr. Susan Shaw. Dr. Shaw was acknowledged for her career in Critical Care Medicine and Anesthesiology and clinical and system improvement work at the local, regional, and provincial levels in Saskatchewan.

A number of workshop sessions were held throughout the two-day conference focusing on various aspects of leadership and the health care system. For the first time this year, delegates were given an opportunity to have direct interaction with a mentor. Participants were able to speak with up to three coaches or mentors for approximately 15 minutes each.

In his comments near the end of the meeting, new CSPL president, Dr. Rollie Nichol, associate chief medical officer, provincial, Alberta Health Services, Calgary, emphasized how important it is for the CSPL to demonstrate its value to members and to the physician community at large.

Next year's conference will be held in Vancouver on May 29 and 30.