

Women in Healthcare Blog

2 July 2013 – Courage to challenge the status quo

UK military personnel all show dedication and commitment. The RAF's Group Captain Wendy Williams recently demonstrated another kind of courage, in challenging processes and systems, that may not be as open and transparent as we would all wish.

Gp Capt Williams is a registered nurse and midwife who has served in the RAF since 1984 and has been a Group Captain since 2003. She applied in 2011 to be the RAF candidate for the tri-service role of Commodore of the Defence Medical Group. In the RAF 19% of Flying Officers (the lowest commissioned rank) are women, though only 5.5% of Air Commodores are women. There are no women at ranks higher than this. <http://www.countingwomenin.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Sex-and-Power-2013-FINALv2.-pdf.pdf>

In fact a male candidate, a doctor, rather than a nurse, was selected. However, Gp Capt Williams decided to challenge this decision and applied for an employment tribunal review. The tribunal, led by employment judge Veronica Dean, ruled that Gp Capt Williams was not only equal to Gp Capt Gaffney, but should have been considered as the RAF's "*properly preferred candidate*". It criticised the RAF for passing over nurses in favour of doctors, and also for the low number of women in top ranks overall.

Clearly, a development pipeline of experienced women is needed to meet the requirements of military leadership. Challenging an organisation and culture like the British Military, where custom, reputation and personal perceptions could support unconscious bias took courage. It could even have meant sacrifice of her future career. Gp Capt Williams should be commended for having the courage to challenge the appointment board's decision. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-23053008>

In the same week, the Government promoted their wish to increase the number of women appointed to public boards (these 8500 people, some having paid appointments, can range from trustees of the British Museum's board, to volunteers who act as independent monitors of prisons, and these people provide independent, expert advice to government departments and ministers on specific issues). In the last year 38% of those appointed were women and by 2015 it is hoped that 50% of appointees will be women <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/drive-to-increase-number-of-women-on-public-boards>

An important link from the announcement, is to where web adverts for such appointments are placed <http://publicappointments.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/> All women's organisations should have this link on their webpages, encourage their members to search this site regularly, and perhaps the organisations should scan it for appointments in areas of their own special interest and draw attention to these imminent (and eminent) appointments. Only if women step up to the plate and apply, will the balance that is being sought be reached. And then we must be confident that fair and equitable processes will be followed in making the appointments.

Professor Jean McEwan