



Finding a Fine Balance

A new program for women in healthcare goes international

By Amanda Jerome

Last year a new program emerged specifically for women working in healthcare. It wasn't about gender equality or managing a practice, it was about something much more personal and essential, finding balance.

The Office of Continuing Education and Professional Development, Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto developed and hosted this new program with no solid data or agenda. Its inception was born out of a perceived need and the participants' reaction was a gamble, but an overwhelming positive response was all the program committee needed to realize they'd hit an unexplored nerve.

"The inspiration for this program came from watching and talking to professional women with whom we interacted through the Office of CEPD. It was very easy to see that many of the women we knew and cared about were taking on more and more responsibilities that were not necessarily going to lead to any form of formal recognition or rewards in terms of career advancement. They were engaged in work that was important and needed to be done, and thus demonstrating concern and a sense of duty, but they were also starting to feel a little burnt out and underappreciated," says Jane Tipping, the Education Consultant who helped develop the Lighten Up! program.

"In several cases, women with whom I spoke commented they felt the quality of their lives was decreasing, their sense of responsibility increasing. They were tired and on a treadmill, truly questioning how they got there and whether it was possible to

ever get off. Often there was a sense of fear that if they did stop doing everything they were doing it would have a negative impact on their professional status. We also observed that these women were very caring in their advice and service to others, but were not giving themselves the same level of thoughtfulness and care; overly responsible in some ways while being irresponsible to themselves," Tipping explains likening it to the saying "It's hard to make a living when all you do is work".



This was the first program of its kind and everything about it, since its initiation, has been different and surprising.

"The way the program developed was also very different to anything else that we have done. We had a spectacularly talented and committed planning group but no clear program. We were never able to meet face to face and so we had to trust that somehow it would all work," says Tipping who has worked as an Education Consultant for the past 25 years. *"We gave titles to the various segments of the program knowing that it would be the participants' experience and individual needs*

that would ultimately shape the content. We knew the outcome that we wanted but not the way there and so everything about the program was organic from the moment we started planning to the actual event. And it worked!"

Doctor Mary Bell, a physician at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre and an Associate Professor in the Department of Medicine at U of T, was one of the program's participants. Her involvement in the Lighten Up! program led her to reevaluate her roles in life.

"A medical career is complex and all encompassing and demands all your attention, so one finds that you have four jobs instead of one. It's difficult to keep all the balls in the air and not be consumed," says Dr. Bell of why she chose to attend the program. "I thought this would be an opportunity to gain some insight and gain some control and perhaps, through reflection, off-load some burden. Also, it was an opportunity to find a community of medical women who might be sharing that same feeling, that might be feeling isolated, and through reflection and discourse at this program, feel not so alone. We're pretty task oriented people, so it'd be a way to learn some techniques to help cope."

Dr. Bell says she enjoyed the mindfulness meditation the most and that it was a technique she could reuse in her daily life.

"Having a journal was great too because you could go back and look at your thoughts and go back and relive those moments, or modify them from your current status," she says. "It was the first time in my career that I had two days for reflection, and most of us feel that we're on a treadmill, and have no time for reflection."

Dr. Bell was surprised at how quickly all the women attending the program became close to each other and the amount of trust that was built during the two day getaway.

"I was really impressed at how quickly we built trust and how sharing and communicative people were being, and how much support you got from people you had just met," she says. "It was really quite dramatic and I think the reason trust could be built so quickly was with good leadership and the people planning the course were able to break the ice and make people feel comfortable. It was important that it was an away location and that it was a quiet location and was a time of commitment to one's self. I think the challenge we all have is once you come back to real life it's hard to maintain that Zen."

Dr. Bell made some significant changes in her life after attending the Lighten Up! program.

"I think as a result of some of the reflection I did there and afterwards, I was able to use the "a more authentic life" idea and ask who am I? What are my priorities and my values?" She explains. "At that point I was not living that life, and I had to make changes on a gradual pace. This has allowed me to live that authentic life. I've made career changes to get a better balance and to focus more on the things that bring me joy."

The Lighten Up! program was such a success that the Office of CEPD will continue with it this year, hosting it twice, once locally and again internationally. The name has been changed to "A Fine Balance" and will be held in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario on March 30 – April 1, 2012 and again in Tuscany, Italy from April 30 – May 3, 2012.

When Dr. Bell was asked if there's anything she'd like to say to women who are considering attending the program this year she said:

"By all means! It'll be the best weekend of your life!"

