

Frances K. Conley, M.D. *Walking Out on the Boys*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998.  
Reviewed by Harvey Fenigsohn.

"A strange freedom comes from knowing that I have little to lose by telling this story. I have acquired a curious inner peace ... realizing, in my lifetime, I will not see women obtain the equality that should be theirs." Such is the pessimistic conclusion of Dr. Frances K. Conley in *Walking Out on the Boys*, her exposé of the pervasive misogyny she experienced at one of America's most prestigious medical schools. Nevertheless, despite nearly insurmountable barriers, Conley became the first woman to pursue a surgical internship at Stanford University Hospital (1966), and the first to become a tenured full professor of neurosurgery at an American medical school (1982). Her unprecedented accomplishments came at a painfully high price, one that nearly bankrupted her stock of self worth.

In *Walking Out on the Boys*, Conley describes the first thirty years of her career from her entrance into medical school in 1961 to her return to the Stanford faculty following a defiant resignation in 1991. Intelligent and independent, the child of a university professor, she found herself irresistibly attracted to medicine, gratefully becoming one of the twelve women out of sixty men in her medical school class. However, Conley soon realized that she had chosen a profession run entirely for and by men. An unwelcome threat to their dominance, her gender barely tolerated, she put up with the humiliating hostility directed against women who dared to join this exclusive fraternity.

Traditionally in the minority, women in all medical fields into the 1970s—but especially in hyper-masculinized fields such as neurosurgery, frequently acquiesced to domineering males, playing the servile roles expected of them. They were realistically convinced that any protest or resistance would seriously jeopardize their tenuous position. Thus, women accepted (if unhappily) routinely being passed over for promotion. They accepted being the subject of vulgar jokes and lewd rumors. And they accepted being patronized, insulted, and groped.

Conley endured the degradation, suffering silently. In choosing to specialize in neurosurgery, she confronted a gender bias that might well have deterred less ambitious peers, since the mere presence of an aspiring woman was considered an outrage. Nevertheless, Conley was accepted into a neurosurgical residency, ultimately becoming both a tenured professor and director of her own research laboratory.

Conley did not consider herself a feminist, nor was she. Instead, going along to get along, she attempted to ignore the malicious threats to her dignity that persisted even after she became a full professor. When female students and colleagues complained to her about their abusive treatment by male doctors, she told them that they had to toughen up and endure the inevitable harassment.

Conley unsuccessfully attempted to become, as she said, "one of the boys." After thirty years, she finally balked. Conley simply could not accept that Dr. Gerald Silverberg, acting chairman of neurosurgery, was to become permanent head of the department. Silverberg, an egregious male

chauvinist, had earlier been accused of sexual harassment. Nevertheless, he continued his insensitive patronizing of the women in the hospital, addressing each as "honey" and making blatant physical advances toward every vulnerable woman. Frustrated in her attempts to prevent Silverberg's appointment, Conley finally resigned her position.

Neither Conley nor Stanford University was prepared for the embroilment which followed. When the local press banged the drum of publicity, Conley's actions quickly gained national attention. She went public with press conferences and a carefully worded opinion piece explaining the reasons for her resignation. In spite of herself, Conley soon became an outspoken and increasingly prominent symbol of sexism in medicine.

As the media storm intensified, the university hesitated to proceed with Silverberg's promotion. With the precision one would expect of a neurosurgeon, Conley describes the devious machinations of the administration which did all it could to protect the image of the medical school rather than respond to the injustices she had exposed. She came to realize that discrimination against women in medicine was both systemic and widespread when women from Stanford as well as from hospitals and medical schools around the country came forward to tell similar stories of discrimination and harassment.

Conley was viewed as a heroic crusader by some, but vilified by her enemies as was evident when her office was rifled, her name summarily removed from all Stanford stationery, and her research lab dismantled even before she had officially departed the university. When the federal government's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) became involved in the grievances at Stanford, the university finally decided not to appoint Dr. Gerald Silverberg as permanent head of the Department of Neurosurgery. After "walking out on the boys," Frances Conley decided to rescind her resignation, reclaiming her tenured faculty position.

Silverberg never attended the sensitivity classes required of him, but his kind of blatant sexism would never again be tolerated at Stanford. In addition to continuing her work at Stanford, Dr. Conley appeared at many other medical schools, encouraging women to resist the misogynistic culture they encountered in class rooms, laboratories, and hospitals.

Despite her vindication, near the end of her book, Conley expressed doubt that the inequities she suffered would be wholly eradicated in her generation. Nevertheless, even she might agree that today, despite some residual, subtle discrimination, women are gaining their rightful place in the world of medicine with help from women like Dr. Frances K. Conley.