**Professor Carol Peterson, PhD**

**What challenges have you had to overcome as a woman in medicine? In research? What lessons are you trying to pass on to future generations?**

When I entered graduate school in the mid ‘80s, one of the things that helped me face obstacles was having impactful mentors, leaders, and role models – many were women, some were men. They helped me understand how to work within a system where there may not always be the support I needed. They taught me how to develop resilience, how to work around obstacles, how to get support, and how to draw upon resources. Those mentoring experiences had a profound impact on how I think about my work with learners and even my work as a clinician. It helped me think about working and leading with integrity. I think about that every day when I am working with learners, students, and postdocs – the importance of thinking about leadership with intentionality, and what kind of impact I want to have. To me, it’s about collaboration and cultivating mutual respect. I understand that while hierarchy will always be part of academic medicine, we should think about how we transcend it, build teams, and deepen collaboration in education, in our clinical work, and in our research. This issue really does transcend gender to impact all of us.

**What lessons have you learned along the way?**

There are a few important things I’ve learned. One is the critical role of mentorship and peer support when you’re facing obstacles – knowing that you have other people who can help you with emotional support, creative ideas, and problem solving. In the work being done related to evidence-based mentorship, one thing that’s emerging is that in addition to having someone working with you who is senior in your field, peer mentorship is extremely valuable for support, resources, collaboration, and problem-solving. Peer mentorship groups are becoming more common in academic medicine because of the positive impact of peer support.

When I think about what has inspired me and how to sustain my work in academic medicine in the long term, one of the most important components is curiosity. I want to make sure that anyone I mentor is prioritizing their efforts around curiosity: for example, what brought them into this field, what still excites them to learn, what questions do they want to answer? Sometimes it will be something specific to advancing science, or directly related to being a woman in medicine, but sometimes it will be broader – what kind of teacher or leader do you want to be? What motivates you, gives you passion? I also emphasize intentionality. So much of what we must do in our work in medicine is reactive. It helps if we can check in with ourselves on a regular basis, not just about what we need or want to do, but who do we want to be as an educator, a researcher, a clinician, a leader? To me, having that kind of regular reflection does so much to build resilience and inspiration. The degree to which I’ve been inspired by the women, and men, who have come before me is their ability to have this type of clarity and build this kind of resilience.

**What things should we be doing to encourage/enable more women to not only enter but flourish in medicine/research?**

Emerging research has been showing us that for any underrepresented group, it’s not just about helping people get access to education or research opportunities…it’s also about making sure they’re getting direct support, experience, and resources. For example, it’s helpful for our learners to have support in learning the “how-tos” of working directly in a lab, sitting in on research meetings and conferences, talking frequently with members of a research team … to understand not just what to do but how what you are doing fits your short term and long-term career goals. We also suggest they experiment with how to pace themselves, how to ask for help, how to take specific steps towards reaching their goals. Because there is only so much in academics that we can learn from books and traditional learning methods, it’s important to figure out strategic professional goal setting and the steps that need to be met. As much as we can continue to recruit people interested in science, education, and clinical work, we need to make sure that they’re getting the information, support, and resources they need to thrive as professionals in medicine.

**When you think of your own work in medicine and research, how are YOU leading with purpose?**

The first aspect related to purpose is the focus of my research. My primary research priority is to develop and investigate treatments for eating disorders. Early in my career, it was important for me to do scientific work that would have direct impact on women and girls. One aspect of my leading with purpose was choosing a field that directly helps people who struggle with eating disorders. We understand now in a way that we did not understand when I first started working in this field that eating disorders impact individuals of all genders, races, and ages. In addition to investigating eating disorder treatments, our research team focuses on understanding the mechanistic factors that maintain eating disorders and how to target them in treatment. We are especially interested in understanding the role of emotion and how changes in “momentary” emotion can impact eating disorder behaviors. To try to answer these questions, we use an assessment phone application and signal study participants several times a day, asking them what they are thinking about , how they are feeling, what they are doing. This research has influenced our treatment development, and we are now in the process of determining patterns of emotions and behaviors that differ between individuals with eating disorders, as well as how best to target these patterns using various treatments. We’ve done a lot of overlapping work with fMRI in trying to understand the brain’s response to the anticipation of eating, trying to hone in on what’s happening psychologically and neurobiologically leading up to the occurrence of the eating disorder behavior. What’s most important to me is how we can take that understanding and make an intervention that impacts people’s lives. For me, conducting research that aims to help people recover from eating disorders is part of leading with purpose

I also do a lot of clinical work as well as research. To me, part of that integration is for the research to have meaning clinically, and for the work I’m doing with patients to help guide and inform my research. I am extremely grateful to my patients for all that they have taught me. Another area of purpose is to continue to learn as much as I can about how to be the most impactful leader, mentor, clinician, researcher, and teacher. To me, intentionality is understanding about how to make the most impact, how to use technology optimally without getting bogged down in it… and how to make sure during every meeting that we’re not just forwarding our own agenda, that we understand who is in the room with us and why they are there. I strive to be guided by integrity in all my interactions, at work and outside of work. I think about this goal constantly. I want to approach everything I do with the highest level of integrity, the greatest curiosity, and the deepest empathy. Being a purposeful leader also involves making sure that in every situation , we recognize the ways in which we inadvertently silence people. I encourage people to tell me directly if they hear things in meetings that impact their voice, their sense of autonomy, their experience of feeling respected. It’s our role as leaders to create and facilitate environments that enable all voices to be heard and respected. In this discussion about women in medicine, it’s especially important that we recognize the importance of intersectionality, that we’re not just talking about women, but that we’re talking about any underrepresented group. Although I am honored to discuss my experiences as a woman in the medical field, it’s absolutely crucial for all of us to broaden our focus in these discussions to all areas of underrepresentation.