

Picture **May Cohen** as a perpetual motion machine.

Always moving, even when she's sitting still. Speaking in rapid-fire sentences, often leaping into the next thought before the first is complete.

The associate dean of health services at McMaster University is driven and pining for time. Time she can never find.

Dr. Cohen has a long list of demands on her. Twelve-hour days in the grey pile of the McMaster University Medical Centre are common. She sits on more than 50 committees, some local, others provincial, national and international. There are young doctors to be taught and women's health issues to be addressed.

And through it all, there is her family.

"You do it by juggling many balls at the same time," explained the 64-year-old wife, mother of three and grandmother of two. "You drop a few sometimes, but what can you do?"

If you took a poll, few would agree that **Dr. Cohen** has ever dropped a ball. In the past 20 years, she has literally helped set the Canadian medical establishment on its ear with her passionate advocacy of women's health issues. She is a tireless worker for gender equality and has put more than a few noses out of joint in her struggle to shine a female light into the male-dominated profession.

ACTIVIST

She is the recipient of several awards, most recently the Governor General's Award in Commemoration of the Persons Case. The nomination form submitted by the Federation of Medical Women of Canada praises her for pioneering women's issues, honors her for challenging the establishment and -- essentially -- for caring.

"I'm no crusader," she laughed, partly because crusaders of yore were not very nice people. "I'm a person who's an activist and who believes strongly in what I do."

This week, **Dr. Cohen** stepped to the podium again, this time for an award from the American Association of Medical Colleges. She accepted the Leadership Development Award in Washington, D.C. -- again for her work in women's issues and medicine.

Not bad for a person who's still not sure why she decided to become a doctor.

"We had to choose in grade 8 what we wanted to do -- go to collegiate, technical or vocational school," she said. "In those days, most girls were channeled into technical, they weren't encouraged to go to the academic side.

"I remember saying I was going to collegiate, that I was going to be a doctor."

Dr. Cohen was born in Montreal but the family moved soon after to Toronto. Mother was a teacher of Yiddish, father the editor of a Jewish newspaper. There was no tradition of medicine in the family though there was an expectation of academic excellence. The family was Jewish, though not active in the practise of its faith. But daughter **May** says it was probably her sense of responsibility that drove her to become a doctor.

"It certainly wasn't money -- we were quite poor growing up," said **Dr. Cohen**, acknowledging that academic challenge and rebellion played their parts. "I think it was a bit of my background, a sense of commitment, doing something for society."

Dr. Cohen finished top of her class in high school -- top student in Ontario -- and moved on to medical school at the University of Toronto. There, she took the gold medal as top graduate. Her husband Gerry took the silver medal, a one-two finish that has prompted its share of dinner-table banter.

Gerry opted to begin family practice right away. **May** was awarded a post-graduate fellowship and decided to study endocrinology. That ended after two years when the Cohens decided to have the first of their three sons. A hiatus from study turned into a passion for family medicine.

It was as a family physician that **Dr. Cohen** discovered a passion for women's issues. Affiliated with a Toronto

hospital -- she won't say which one -- she struggled with an administration that opposed abortion.

"It was not a liberal-thinking hospital and I was told by a board member that the (abortion) committee would continue to exist so long as we selected non-controversial abortions," said **Dr. Cohen**, some of whose patients were forced to go to England to terminate their pregnancies. "From there, I got involved in pro-choice matters."

It's impossible to document the transformation from family physician to internationally-recognized activist. Each passing year brought a new issue, a new problem to be addressed. Encouraging women to enter medicine. Removing the barriers to advancement. Forcing the establishment to recognize that women's medical needs are different than those of men. Abuse of patients by doctors. The creation of a university curriculum reflecting women's needs.

"Medicine has been defined from a male perspective. Until recently, the vast majority of practitioners have been male and the leaders in academia and medical politics have been male.

"There is a need to recognize the differences between men and women and not look at the two as the same."

She is a defender of a woman's right to choose and of making responsible decisions. As a physician, she demands that doctors understand the needs of women patients. As a teacher, she insists that universities make women welcome and provide them with a setting in which to thrive. As an advocate, she wants to educate, remove barriers and create the best possible environment.

Standing up for your beliefs has its price. Just a year ago, she was roasted by McMaster colleagues when The Spectator reported her comments about a visiting radiology professor who ended his lecture with a slide of a naked women. When students protested, the male teacher dismissed them as humorless.

ACHIEVEMENT

Peers wanted to handle the situation quietly and lashed **Dr. Cohen** when she spoke out.

"It was very hard -- there was a shoot-the-messenger feeling," she said quietly. "As it turned out, there was a recognition of what had gone on, but it was very painful."

But the highs outweigh the lows. **Dr. Cohen** has shown a consistency of achievement since she arrived to teach family medicine in 1977. From assistant to full professor in 10 years. Supervisor of the family practice team for 15 years. Co-founder of the Women's Health Office -- the first of its kind in Canada. Associate dean of health services within the Faculty of Health Sciences.

Outside the university, the activist has chaired gender-issue committees for both the Ontario and Canadian medical associations. She is a past-president of the Federation of Canadian Medical Women of Canada. She helped create the Ontario medical-school curriculum on wife assault.

The list goes on.

"I'm satisfied," **Dr. Cohen** said simply. "I have a sense of making some small difference."

Happily married to **Gerry Cohen**, a prominent physician in his own right, she bursts with pride about her three grown sons and is unabashedly smitten by her grandsons.

Ask what she's most proud of and the answer comes without hesitation.

"Family is my crowning achievement. I'm just sorry I don't have more time to spend with them."

PROFILE

Name: **May Cohen**

Age: 64

Spouse: **Gerry Cohen**, with three sons and two grandsons.

Residence: Burlington.

Car: 1992 Honda Accord.

Most admired person: "My family."

Last book read: "I don't have time."

Favorite TV show: Rarely watches.

Hobbies: Knitting, swimming, skiing, symphony and the opera. "I make the time."

Favorite vacation spot: Australia or the Caribbean.

CITATION (MLA STYLE)

Herron, Shaun N.. "The Passion of May Cohen: Mac dean shines female light on male-dominated medicine." *Hamilton Spectator, The (Ontario, Canada)*, FINAL ed., sec. Real life, 3 Nov. 1995, p. B1 / FRONT. *NewsBank: Access World News*, infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/10B3000F170A9328. Accessed 1 Nov. 2022.

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