

Beulah Bewley – My Life as a Woman and Doctor

Beulah Bewley (Author), Susan Bewley (Editor).
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(hardback)

This autobiography by Dame Beulah Bewley who has achieved much fame and recognition for her work in public health and leadership (e.g. within the Medical Women's Federation and the General Medical Council) takes us from her childhood in Northern Ireland, where she was born in 1929, to her many groundbreaking firsts among the sexist mores of her times. Her training and deep involvement with the value of contraceptive provision is clearly highlighted as one of her reflections during times of great change and development of the field, and spans the horrors of women's experiences pre the 1967 Abortion Act. Her husband Thomas, a psychiatrist, provided great support so that Beulah's career could progress as well as raising their children.

Beulah's first child, Susan (a professor of obstetrics and gynaecology), ably

puts the reminiscences into readable form, although I did find it unhelpful that there were so many numbered comments that had to be sought at the back of the book, rather than being provided as footnotes on the relevant page, particularly when expansion of initials such as RCP didn't appear on the page on which they were mentioned. The chronology of Beulah's career and publications listed at the end of the book make for a curriculum vitae to emulate!

Medical professionals and social commentators interested in the history of sexual and reproductive health in the UK as a whole in the 20th century will find this book of interest. In terms of prejudice against women as scientists and doctors, Beulah has never accepted limitations. She quotes Baroness Wootton: "I've never had any problems with mature and intelligent men", firmly putting the ball in the Y chromosome's court! There are moving reflections about the Bewley's second child, Sarah, who had Down's syndrome with very limited life expectancy, who in fact survived until the age of 44 years.

Beulah's public health work started with studies of childhood smoking and the effects on health and school attainment. Her pleas for the future are for truly joined up health, housing and social care, education for parenthood and first aid training in schools, and meaningful price rises for tobacco products.

Now in their 90s, Beulah and Thomas Bewley have overcome many health problems and continue to be a great support to each other, valuing their relationships with their children and grandchildren.

Reviewed by **Alyson Elliman**

Locum Consultant, Croydon Health Services NHS
Trust, Surrey, UK; alysonelliman@aol.com

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