

European power women in otolaryngology: a focus on Laura Viani, Ireland's first female otolaryngologist

BY ELINOR WARNER

Professor Laura Viani is a Consultant Otolaryngologist at Beaumont Hospital and Temple Street University Children's Hospital and has been a member of Council of the Royal College of Surgeons of Ireland for the last 17 years. As the first female Irish ENT surgeon, she founded the National Hearing Implant and Hearing Research centre in Ireland and established a National Cochlear Implant (CI) programme in 1995. **Elinor Warner** had the pleasure of interviewing her and finding out what makes her tick.



Laura Viani MSc, FRCSI,

Consultant Otolaryngologist, Beaumont Hospital and Temple Street University Children's Hospital, Dublin, Ireland.

How would you summarise your career to date?

I went to medical school at Trinity College, Dublin. I always had an interest in surgery despite very few females following this pathway. I started in Paediatric surgery and progressed into ENT. I enjoyed the variety, the age mix, and the range ENT offered. During my postgraduate training, I moved to Manchester to do an MSc in Audiological Medicine followed by a registrar post in otolaryngology in Liverpool where I met and worked with Professor Philip Stell, who became a great mentor to me and gave me confidence that, as a woman, I could do this. He was a great inspiration to me, particularly with his interest in research which has influenced me throughout my career.

I returned to Ireland for senior registrar training and was appointed as a consultant in 1992. Before taking up appointment, I went to Cambridge to do a fellowship with David Moffatt in skull base and neuro-

otology. While there, I had opportunity to attend the cochlear implant (CI) clinics and found it amazing that children born profoundly deaf were learning to speak. That wasn't happening where I was from.

What have been your key achievements and most significant challenges to date and how did you overcome these?

I returned from Cambridge and I spent two years setting up the CI service in Ireland. It started off small, with just three people and a corner desk at the back of the hospital. My first CI clinic was two weeks before I gave birth to my son, Dylan. I was recruiting staff overseas when I was seven months pregnant. I wanted it to be a public service, so all had easy access. Initially I ended up having to buy hearing aids for the children for hearing aid trials prior to implantation, otherwise often they would be waiting six to eight months for regular aids. Things have changed a lot in the last decade; we now have two other consultants, funding for bilateral implants in children and 30 people on our team working at the new National Hearing and Implant Research Centre opened by our Prime Minister recently. We have come a long way.

What obstacles did you face when trying to set up the CI programme in Ireland and how did you overcome these?

People were not interested, and didn't see deaf children as a

priority, so getting people to listen was a challenge. I have never been shy of using politics or walking into the Department of Health. I think that being a woman surgeon probably helped me there, as I stood out more. Also, the fact that I wasn't doing private practice appealed to the Department of Health, so they did eventually listen.

Together with patients and parents, we set up the 'Happy New Ear' campaign and used social media to educate people into listening to us.

What are the challenges facing otology in the next five to 10 years and longer term?

I think making sure that the older generation get timely access to implants and services, and supporting young hearing impaired people through school and university to make sure they reach their potential; children can encounter difficulties particularly during the adolescent years. Finally, with funding being so difficult, we need to fight to keep the highest standards, so all patients get prompt access to ENT services overall.



Laura Viani and colleagues with Leo Varadkar (Prime Minister of Ireland) at the opening of the Irish National Hearing Implant Centre.

"I found it amazing that children born profoundly deaf were learning to speak. That wasn't happening where I was from"



Laura's lecture to celebrate the opening of the centre.

What advice would you give your junior colleagues now?

Do what you would like to do, be persistent and create your own future. Don't forget that having a child is one of the most important things in the world and it won't wait forever. For young women, your career is wonderful but being a mother is also. My advice to young men is have your career, but don't forget your family.

What do you think are the factors involved in making successful teams? Why is diversity important?

I think the key is listening to people, taking a personal interest, being thoughtful, and making sure everyone feels their opinions are valued and respected – help them succeed. You spend a lot of time with these people so keep the harmony. Deal with issues as they arise, be decisive, have clear goals. I am lucky to have a multicultural wonderful team from all over the world; from USA, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Europe and South America. They bring different ideas, encourage us all to be more thoughtful of others. It is interesting.

What are your personal goals for the next five years?

I would like to develop our Research Centre, take on more PhD students, collaborate with other centres in Ireland and internationally. I would also be interested in taking up future roles in the Royal College of Surgeons, and ensuring my CI team stays strong, and has a good successor so that our hard work continues.

How do you juggle your career and personal life?

I tend to get up very early, frequently at 5am I start reviewing emails and planning for the day. I prefer to have things under

control and do things for myself rather than rely on other people too much. I am very organised, even with my home.

How would your family describe you in three words?

In the words of my son: tenacious, inspiring, empathetic.

What do you like to do outside of work?

I don't have a lot of free time, but I enjoy spending it with friends and think it is very important to do so, I like reading and enjoy my book club. I also have a piano which I really want to get back to playing sooner rather than later.

What have been the biggest lessons that you have learned?

The best way to predict your future is to create it. Don't expect other people to do things for you. Be assertive but not aggressive, and finally, be kind – and don't make other people feel bad, there is no point it doesn't get you anywhere.

INTERVIEWED BY



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OTHER INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED FEMALE ENT SURGEONS

Professor An Boudewyns, MD, PhD,
Paediatric ENT Surgeon,
Antwerp University
Hospital, Belgium.



Where do you see the speciality of paediatric ENT in five to 10 years?

Greater knowledge of the pathophysiology and genetics of many conditions will lead to more personalised and less invasive treatment options, many of which may be non-surgical.

What advice would you give your junior colleagues about leadership?

Very early in my career, I realised the importance of working in a multidisciplinary team and looking with an open mind to what one can learn from colleagues with the same or a different medical speciality. To me, leadership implies respect for your colleagues, patients and parents even if they have a different mindset or cultural background. Be honest, humble and respectful in what you do and the way you care for your patients and their families.

Professor Isabel Vilaseca, MD, PhD,
Head and Neck
Surgeon, The Hospital
Clinic of Barcelona.



Where do you see the speciality of head and neck surgery in five to 10 years?

I see it progressing with technology along the path of minimally invasive surgery, with increasing use of robotics and automation.

What advice would you give your junior colleagues about leadership?

Leadership is based on the ability to manage and lead teams, following a clear strategy that benefits the group and which enhances the sense of belonging to it. The leader should be seen as a strategic director that sorts priorities, promotes and encourages the creativity of the group, as well as inspiring confidence and commitment from the team.