

**SPEECH FOR THE**  
**FEDERATION OF MEDICAL WOMEN OF CANADA**  
**MAY COHEN AWARD – OCT 3, 2020**

Thank you to my nominators, the award committee, board members, and everyone listening in today but especially a thank you to Dr. May Cohen - this is such a great honour to have you here tonight as well.

I hope you will allow me now the privilege to share with you, five things I've learned from the FMWC that together I think led me to being **here** at this exact moment in time, receiving **this** specific prestigious award.

**First – I've learned the importance of physician philanthropy from the FMWC.**

I can remember still in 1986, as a first year medical student, walking down the hallway of Memorial University of Newfoundland stopping to look at the announcement board. There it was – a paper asking “are you a female medical student?” – yes. Are you in financial need? – yes. Sign up for FMWC and apply for a \$1000 scholarship. So, I did and I got it.

\$1000 may not sound like a lot today but I assure you back then it was. That FMWC medical student scholarship was a major positive impact on my health and wellbeing that year and although I went on to sign up for the military subsidization program in my second year of medical school - I've always remained a loyal FMWC member for now almost 35 years. I share this award today with the generation of women physicians ahead of me that donated to the charitable arm of the FMWC - which is now called the “Medical Women of Canada Foundation”.

**Second – I've learned the importance of mentoring, networking and peer support from the FMWC.**

Since the early 1990s I've been attending AGMs and learning from all but especially the core group of women from one generation ahead of me – they had so much very wise wisdom to pass on personally and professionally over these many years. Their presence in our midst speaks to one of the uniqueness of this specific organization – and that is its very active multi-generational presence. Time doesn't allow me to thank everyone individually but you know who you are. This has definitely been a group effort to get me here. Thank you.

**Third - I learned about political advocacy from the FMWC.**

My first first-hand political lesson was learned bright and early Monday morning after I was returning to my military workspace after having just attended a FMWC AGM in the early 2000s. I was suddenly ordered to be marched down into my clearly upset boss's office to be sat down and “educated” about the rules around talking to politicians when one is in uniform especially around political sensitive topics, like “women's health stuff”. Until that time I really had been so politically naïve I really had not understood that nice family doctor from Toronto I'd been talking to that was so interested in learning about the state of women's health care in the military

wasn't just any federation member. she was a MP (member of parliament) and not just any MP but the Minister of Public Health who apparently saw and talked to the minister of defence on quite the regular basis. So that's how I first learned about the potential power of using politics to get change on women's health - through the Honorable Dr. Carolyn Bennett... Although she's now been a politician longer than she had been a practicing physician – I know in her heart she remains a passionate advocate for women's health – especially Indigenous.

On that point – I would be remiss to not take this opportunity of privilege to do a shout out and recognize that some of our Indigenous physician and medical learner sisters and brothers need our support. I encourage anyone that is not Indigenous to reflect on how they might best show and provide that support. One place to start is to go to the IPAC website– Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada and learn more about their charitable arm and their membership options for allies.

#### **Fourth - I learned the importance of the civilian Canadian medical professions from the FMWC.**

In 2005 BGen Dr. Hilary Jaeger, our second and last female Surgeon General supported me to become the FMWC President. We were both lucky in that that same year the CMA President was Dr. Ruth Collins-Nakai., Dr. Collins-Nankai agreed to tour the Role One Field Hospital in Afghanistan and returned back to Canada to work closely with the CMA, the Royal College and the College of Family Physicians to result in the successful recruitment of very much needed civilian physician augmentation support to the Canadian military. Ruth has continued to liaise the civilian and military medical worlds through her ongoing service as an HCol. I'm also honoured to be on the Canadian Medical Foundation board with her. Thank you, Ruth and the work you have done to bring CMA, Royal College, CFP together with the military.

#### **Last but not least - I learned about sex- and gender - specific medicine from the FMWC.**

I learned about it long before it was cool from Shelley Ross and May Cohen. They put together a training manual in gender mainstreaming in health almost 20 years ago that was pivotal in my foundational understandings of the systemic biases we have in medicine and health care education. If you haven't seen it, unfortunately, despite its age its still a value-added resource to understand the still present inequities in the health care system. It was updated in 2013 and its available to download for free at the Medical Women International Association [mwia.net](http://mwia.net) website under publications.

My advocacy work that continues focusing on military women's unmet health care needs really is a culmination of all these various experiences from the FMWC. So, although I never worked directly with or for May Cohen, she has had a major impact on my life. So, to be given an award named in her honour is something deeply personal and fulfilling to me. I'm truly honoured and hope to continue to lean in and live up that honour.

Normally the speech would stop here but times are not normal.

So, I will instead conclude it with a call for action. Now may well be one of the most important times in decades to stand up, be seen and be heard for women's health issues. We need more women's voices at the decision making levels of all tables. Look around you, who are the women ahead of, beside you and behind you that need and deserve to be amplified and supported. Think about how you can do that. One easy way to do that is to nominate them for awards. If you have never nominated someone before, FWMC Awards are open until Dec 31.

So now I close my speech with the challenge for everyone here today to follow in the footsteps of May Cohen "the Gender Lady" to get out there and take up space and be heard.