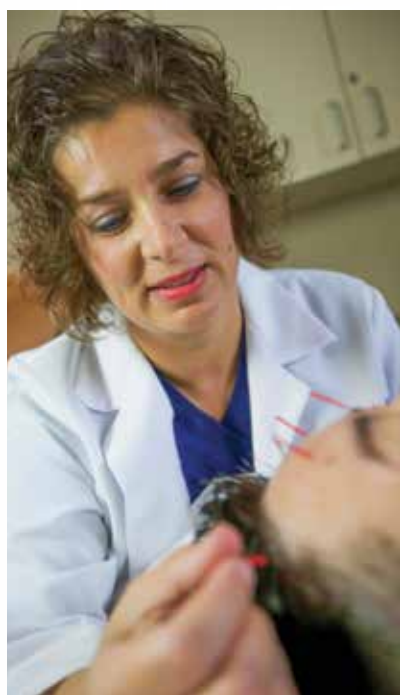


# DR. RENEE MELFI



# There's nothing as females that we can't do

Alyssa Dearborn



As a spine interventionist, Dr. Renee Melfi knows how it feels to be one of the only women in the room. The underrepresentation of women in the sciences is something that she has noticed for years.

"Even things like high school classes and then college where you're looking primarily at sciences, I think in my physics lab in high school I was literally the only female in the lab." Dr. Melfi explained, "As I went further on in my training, the field I chose was called physical medicine and rehabilitation, and that is very large, broad specialty.

Then as I became more specialized in my specialty, which is inter-ventional spine procedures, I started going to their international meetings, like their annual meeting that they would have every year.

I would look around and there were only a handful of women in a hotel conference center where there's probably 700 physicians attending."

As a member and instructor for Spine Intervention Society, she has been attending the annual meetings for 19 years. Within those years, the gap in women's attendance has been closing. However, Dr. Melfi has noticed the persisting gap in leadership.

"I noticed a few years ago I was invited to give a lecture at their international meeting. I was one of two females giving a lecture over a three-day conference. And I actually brought it to the attention of one of the board members and I think his response was something like, 'Well, there's no other good candidates.' And I said, 'You can't possibly mean that. Look around the room.' I think as a woman in this field, my hope now is to try to advance and give a chance to some of the younger females coming out of fellowships in interventional programs because it is hard to look at the roster of those conferences and see one or two females."

Since that time, she said, the administration and board are now aware of the misrepresentation, and there is now a greater number of females giving presentations and the international annual scientific meeting.

Working hard to become one of the leading experts in her field has helped her in her goal to better help her patients. In a time when most practitioners are a part of a large medical group or employed by hospitals, Dr. Melfi strives to be an exception.

"Twenty years ago, it was more common for there to be small to mid-sized groups as well as a large group here and there. In the course of my practice career here in Syracuse that's very much transitioned," she said.

By choosing not to follow the trend of becoming a part of a large practice with many mid-level practitioners, she said she is able to give patients very personalized care as well as additional medical options such as patient stem cell injections, a procedure that uses the patient's own stem cells to assist in pain management.

"I wanted to have the autonomy to remain my own boss in medicine and do things the way I want to and take care of patients the way I want. So instead of just following this trend where medicine is getting very big, I made the very conscious decision to go the other way where I am intentionally staying as small as I can. I want to be the option where someone can have a very personalized experience."

Being an expert in interventional medicine provided Dr. Melfi with opportunities that have taken her all around the country. After finishing her fellowship with Dr. Charles Aprill - the then most renowned interventionist - in New Orleans, she decided to return home to Central New York.

"It was actually challenging," she said when asked about what it was like to leave and then return home, "I left for all of my training and I'm very close with my family. I never had a big worldly experience when I was growing up. I had consciously made the decision that I will go wherever it is required to get the best education I could."

But just as she made the conscious decision to move away, she made the conscious decision to return to Syracuse.

"I felt like I was missing everything with my family," she said, "My grandma was still alive and my niece and nephew were little kids and were growing up. I was missing every event because I was a flight away, I wasn't a drive away. The cities I lived in were significantly larger, so moving back to Syracuse was an adjustment. Another reason not just for family was that I loved the outdoors. I think Upstate New York is just gorgeous if you're interested in outdoor activities. Those are all things that I had missed and I had really wanted those opportunities in my life again. This is my home. Home is where the heart is."

Just as Dr. Renee Melfi makes it her mission to provide the best specialized care, she also wants women to be able to work towards their goals like she was able to.

"I think women should continue to always aim high," she said, "I don't feel like we should be limited by things that we see as barriers in terms of the number of years of schooling that it takes to accomplish something. There's nothing as females that we can't do and I think it really comes down to belief in self, poise, and hard work. I don't think there's a thing that someone can't accomplish if she works hard."

Women should try to accomplish anything in terms of what they're interested in and be okay if they're the only female in the room." Because she had the great fortune to train with her mentor, Dr. Aprill, she feels it is her duty to be an instructor and pass on the skills that he taught her. She met the rigorous qualifications to become an instructor for the Spine Intervention Society, the international organization of which Dr. Aprill was a co-founder.

"There's very strict criteria for advancing to position of instructor for this organization, and I'm one of two females in the entire United States that is a certified instructor for the Spine Intervention Society and one of seven in the entire world," she said. "Since Dr. Aprill passed earlier this year, I feel even more passionate to pass down his extraordinary expertise." SWM