



2017 Robert A. Hatcher Family Planning Mentor Award Acceptance Speech

By Dr. Diana Greene Foster

I want to express my deep gratitude toward my fabulous colleagues. Only I, and now you, know that I learned much more from them than they did from me.

Great ideas may seem to come from one person. But they are so much more likely when you have a set of colleagues with different knowledge, skills and perspectives. Dr. Eleanor Drey sparked the Turnaway study when she said, in her role as caring abortion provider, “I wonder what happens to people we turn away.” I, in my role as super nerd, saw how we could give that question a rigorous research study design to measure the effect of both abortion provided and denied. And Tracy Weitz, in her role as instigator, one might say provocateur, egged me on. You may not know that before she became a funder, Tracy had never heard a bad idea. You could bring her the dimmest spark of an idea and by the end of your time talking to her, you would have a hot topic research study with the names of everyone you needed to make it ignite. Oh, don’t we wish she liked all our ideas now.

I’m extremely lucky to be in the position to build such a fantastic team. I spent 2006 and much of 2007 writing almost entirely futile requests for money to recruit women above and below the gestational limit from Dr. Drey’s Women’s Options Center. It was the fluke of an up stock market year in 2007 that our favorite foundation had money to spend. And so they took a risk on a really great but untested idea and a junior but very motivated researcher. After a laborious four years of setting up the study and enlisting recruitment sites, I was suddenly inundated with too much data. I wanted a team of first author researchers and partners, not assistants – people who could bring expertise from different fields and perspectives– to evaluate substance use issues, psychological outcomes, adolescence, adoption, birth outcomes, qualitative data. People who could write articles for different disciplines. And, if I had this, the credibility of the whole study would be greater because it would be not just one woman reporting the findings but 15, not just in the field of demography but in epidemiology, nursing, public health, psychology, medicine, and sociology. So I want to salute my brilliant colleagues who have taken a lead on Turnaway papers – Drs. Antonia Biggs, Karuna Chibber, Loren Dobkin, Caitlin Gerdts, Health Gould, Laura Harris, Angel Aztlan-James, Katrina Kimport, Heidi Moseson, Sarah Raifman, Lauren Ralph, Corinne Rocca, Sarah Roberts, Gretchen Sisson and Ushma Upadhyay. Thank you!

After Ushma, Sarah, Corinne, Lauren and Antonia’s generous words, I figure I am at my absolute peak of credibility right now. So I wanted to share some thoughts about women in science. Our field, reproductive health, both clinical and social science, attracts a large number of brilliant female minds. Probably most of this has to do with the subject matter – we have a vested interest in improving women’s lives. Our own not-quite-perfect or totally horrendous

reproductive health care experiences made us want better for women coming behind us. But because we, mostly women and like-minded men, are all gathered in this fascinating field, we also have an opportunity to model collaborative science. Collaborating across disciplines makes better science and it creates a working environment that supports not only women, but all scientists.

I once sat next to famous astrophysicist on a long flight from Africa to the US -- no, not Neil DeGrasse Tyson. He had been checking on his telescopes in South Africa. I had just been blown over by the official government stance on abortion in Tunisia, leagues ahead of the United States, that is predicated entirely on women's rights and autonomy. So this astrophysicist and I got to talking about women in science. He told me about a brilliant assistant professor astrophysicist who came to his office to tell him that she wanted to leave academia because she didn't like the culture, the jockeying for position, the not being listened to or taken seriously. He had an immediate reaction which was to tell her, "I can teach you how to be aggressive. I can teach you to play the game." And then he looked at her face and realized his mistake. The solution to her problem is not to force everyone to do things the way they have always been done, alienating everyone who doesn't fit that culture. It is to reexamine our culture, our assumptions about what serious science looks like. And it needs to start early.

High school science fairs are exactly the wrong introduction to science. For the high school project, the research question isn't important -- nobody really cares whether one piece of bread grew moldier than the other. You are in a race to do the work, on your own, and produce the cleanest results for the poster on time. Your parents' help, at midnight the night before the damn fair, is unacknowledged and illicit. If your poster is prettier than the kid's next to you, you win the prize.

Real science is first about caring about the research question. How does having an abortion affect women's lives? Are women resilient to bad relationships, substance use disorders, pregnancies before they are ready? And where are the limits of that resiliency? Shouldn't that be everyone's science fair project? And then you find other people who care passionately about this research question too -- people who bring different skills and perspectives, and who can provide checks on your analyses. It isn't a beauty contest for who has the cleanest looking data for their poster, it is about how to communicate complexity, how to share data that moves the threshold of our understanding. In ideal scenarios, with enough money, data and time, we share the ownership of our findings.

So this is the message I am trying to impart: We don't need an aggressive competitive field. We can be exceedingly productive with a collaborative, respectful one. Not focused on our egos but on the research and what each of us can bring to it. But we have to critically examine parts of our culture that lead to us to reward only ego-driven solo work. I have some suggestions.

First, **reexamine what leadership looks like**. We at the UCSF Bixby center were looking for a new director this past year. And so we asked a giant of our field for suggestions for candidates

and he came up with about 5 names. All were men. In a field that must be 80% women. I asked him how he came up with his list and he said he thought about each of several organizations and who had leadership qualities there. If you expect that a leader looks like a white man, that's a narrow set of candidates. Fortunately, we didn't limit our candidates. I can't say who, but we might just have identified a dynamic visionary who happens to be a woman.

But this suggestion is more than just "don't only hire white men." There are other assumptions about what is professional that are based on a model of men with stay-at-home spouses as leaders. I once saw a presentation in our field whose purpose was to train junior researchers. And it said that mentioning your children in a presentation was distracting and unprofessional. Maybe. But we have to be careful that we don't decide that to be considered professional, we have to deny the parts of our lives that don't conform to an outdated, exclusionary picture of leadership. What is unprofessional about taking care of other people?

If we don't allow people to have outside commitments, we will limit ourselves to leaders who either have no dependents or who have stay-at-home partners. And that's a narrow set of candidates. We, in our field, have structural barriers to including women and people from disadvantaged backgrounds— long underpaid postdocs or fellowships that only people from wealthy families can pursue, egregiously stingy maternity leaves, conferences held on weekends or without free on-site childcare and certainly no eldercare, expectations of early morning or late evening meetings – that mean that only those people who have a lot of money and whole support teams can thrive. And there are barriers to young people entering the field and contributing in proportion to their talents. This is one we used to do: you have to have a big grant to become faculty and you cannot apply for a grant unless you are faculty. I bet your organization has its own.

There are also changes to professional culture that would help us be more inclusive and, not coincidentally, also much more productive. Have you read the hilarious piece from 2015 in the Washington Post by Alexandra Petri? It is *Famous quotes, the way a woman would have to say them during a meeting*. I will give you an example. The quote "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" as said by a woman in a meeting: "I'm sorry, Mikhail, if I could? Didn't mean to cut you off there. Can we agree that this wall maybe isn't quite doing what it should be doing? Just looking at everything everyone's been saying, it seems like we could consider removing it. Possibly. I don't know, what does the room feel?" I'm not recommending that we be constantly deferential. But is Reagan's version better? Gorbachev later said what he thought about Reagan's speech, "Well, I'll tell you the truth, don't be surprised but, we really were not impressed." After the Berlin Wall was, in fact, torn down, it was not the guy shouting orders, taking someone else's idea and presenting it as his own, but the guy who made the wall obsolete who received the Nobel Peace Prize. The idea that leadership means being dictatorial needs to go.

My next suggestion is to **fund multi-year large multi-disciplinary grants on really big questions**. Like the space mission, and, of course, with similar sized budgets. A great study is the product

of experts at every level – from interviewer to investigator. These grants would enable researchers to build and sustain these teams of experts. The criteria for these grants would be vision and interdisciplinary collaboration. What do women, all women, really want in contraceptive technology and counseling? What is an ideal service delivery system that would meet the needs of both clinicians and patients? And Corinne Rocca has a jump on you on this one -- what is an unintended pregnancy and how does it affect women's lives?

And my final suggestion is to **mentor all your mentees to be your successor**. Even if you have no intention of ever leaving. Mentor each person so that you would eventually want them to be your funder or your boss or, even more terrifying, a journalist writing about these issues. Inspire curiosity, generosity, inclusivity and passion.

I thank the Society of Family Planning for this award. I thank my colleagues at ANSIRH for nominating me and for their profound contributions to the Turnaway Study. I thank Rana Barar for making everything good happen and Heather Gould for being there from the beginning. I thank Dan Grossman for leading ANSIRH in exactly the cooperative style I am advocating. Thanks to Phil Darney whose respect for interdisciplinary research is why we have such strong social science at UCSF. Thanks to Cynthia Harper who has given me great advice over many years. I was worried about my feminist credentials if I changed my last name when I had my son. And Cynthia said, "It isn't feminist if you don't get to choose." I thank my husband Seth Foster, here today. It's our 19th anniversary on Tuesday. Is there anything more romantic than the Forum? My in-laws, who are currently taking care of our two teenaged kids, are very hard to impress. (see, I mentioned my kids) I told them about this award. And they thought it was fine. Then I said that it usually goes to a physician who trains other clinicians to do abortions. But that this year, the society was giving it to me. And then they understood the magnitude of this honor.

Thank you all very much!

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October 15, 2017
Atlanta, GA