Being Surgical Superwoman

“Superwoman”—you may have heard the term before. I’m not referring to a female superhero in full-body spandex and a cape, but the oft-used term to describe the modern woman attempting to balance all aspects of her life—a full-time career while being a mother, wife, etc.—all while maintaining her sanity.

As a woman with a career, I’ve given this term some thought. Granted, I have a few years to go before I plan on having kids, so there's some time to practice my juggling skills. In the past when I’ve thought about this “superwoman” concept, I’ve envisioned a stereotype. The beautiful woman in a sharp-looking suit, briefcase in one hand, a child’s hand in the other, strolling down a busy city street fully in control of the million items on her to-do list—no problem, piece of cake.

After reading a recent article [1] in the *Archives of Surgery*, a *JAMA/Archives* journal, though, my idea of this balancing act has changed a bit as my vision shifts from this flashy business woman to a woman in surgical scrubs, scalpel in hand.

According to the article, a recent questionnaire of board-certified male and female surgeons shows women are increasingly entering the surgical profession. The majority of both men and women surgeons say if they could choose to be a surgeon again, they would.

However, the results also reveal woman surgeons may have different views on how their career affects their personal life. According to the study:

1. Both men and women surgeons felt they worked too many hours—men reporting to work 65 hours per week, while women reported working 60 hours. Both men and women, on average, reported 50 hours per week of work would be ideal.
2. Meanwhile, women surgeons were more likely to favor part-time work than their male counterparts.
3. Women surgeons were more likely to have children later in life or not at all than male surgeons.

4. Finally, women surgeons felt maternity leave and a childcare facility at work was important, more so than male surgeons.

Looking at these findings, it seems that while the majority of women surgeons love what they do, they may also feel they sacrifice aspects of their personal life for their profession. Being a surgeon is a demanding career involving long, often irregular hours, not to mention years of training. It adds yet another dimension to the balancing act between work and personal life.

Do women have to choose—surgeon or mom? Absolutely not, and this study confirms it. The fact that most woman surgeons say they'd do it all over again if they could shows most female surgeons either choose being a surgeon over a mom, but are ok with it, or do both and find a way to make it work.

However, these findings do suggest that as more women choose to become surgeons, the surgical profession could undergo some changes. The article suggests issues such as establishing standard maternity leave policy for surgeons, placing a childcare service in the workplace and providing options for alternative or part-time work hours are ways in which an increased number of women surgeons could shape the surgical professional in the future.

Surgeons undoubtedly have incredible responsibility associated with their jobs as well as unmatched dedication. They are saving lives, and that, to an extent, makes them superheroes in its own right. However, they're also individuals with a family and a life outside of their career. The more the surgical profession allows for that balance, the better quality of care these surgeons—both women and men—will be able to provide.

Are you a woman surgeon playing superwoman? I'd love to hear about your experiences. Email Amanda.McGowan@advantagemedia.com *[2]*

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