

Inspiring Women

Episode 10: Dr. Barbara Levy

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to Inspiring Women with Lorrie McGraw. I am your host, Laurie McGraw. I have spent the past 30 years in leadership, and over the years I've come to learn one thing. Women need women. And not just any women, but inspiring women. Tune in every week to hear from women at the pinnacle of their careers, and from others who are just starting out. Episodes can be found at inspiringwomen.show, or subscribe on your favorite podcast app. Thanks for listening. And I hope you will be inspired.

Laurie McGraw:

Welcome to another episode of Inspiring Women, and I am so pleased today to be speaking with Dr. Barbara Levy. Now Dr. Levy is an accomplished physician. She is a lifelong advocate for advancing women's health. She spent 30 years running a thriving practice that was focused on comprehensive, holistic women's health. Dr. Levy is a researcher and an educator. She's written over 85 publications. She is a health policy expert, health policy wonk, we might even say. She was the first female president of AGL. She was the first female Vice President executive, Physician Executive at ACOG. She's chaired the AMA's RUC, she's been on the CPT panels. She has traveled the globe advocating for women's health. She is constantly in the media. You may have seen her in many different outlets, including Oprah Winfrey. And Dr. Levy, I'm so happy to be speaking with you today.

Dr. Barbara Levy:

Oh, Laurie, it's really my pleasure.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, why don't we just dive right in? And you've done so many things across your long career advocating for women, advocating for women's health, but what are you doing right now?

Dr. Barbara Levy:

So I'm still doing some advocacy work. I'm working with some small startup companies and some organizations to try to really move the needle and change some of the structural, both racial and gender bias, that's in medicine. And it's so embedded in our healthcare system, that it takes someone knowing what those structural problems are to deconstruct them. And I think right now, the pandemic is a horrible thing for all of us to go through, but it's also an opportunity to step back and recognize some of those systemic issues that have disenfranchised women and people of color for so long in medicine.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, Barbara, thanks so much for opening with that. I want to also talk about your career choices over the years. You led a thriving practice for many years, and then you made a big switch to focusing on health policy. Why did you make that switch? Why was that so important to you?

Dr. Barbara Levy:

So first, it wasn't really a big switch, because I was already working with the AMA and ACOG on coding and reimbursement issues. So a lot of that was volunteer time. My work with the RBRVS Update Committee and coding and reimbursement issues with ACOG had been going on for many, many years. But I stepped back, and looked at where my practice was, and it was really clear that the practice of private medicine was changing rapidly. And the opportunity to stay the kind of practice that I was, was not going to last forever. Practices were being acquired by the hospital right and left. And my position as the Medical Director for Women's and Children's Services for their five hospital system was in jeopardy unless I allowed the hospital to buy my practice. And so I looked at that and said, "Do I really want to be employed by the hospital? Or do I want to take what I've learned over these years, and put it into good use over the last third of my career, by trying to help others do a better job taking care of women?"

Dr. Barbara Levy:

It was a very, very difficult decision. I cried a lot. I loved my practice. I practiced in the same place for 30 years. I was part of the community. I loved my patients. We all cried when I left. But in the end, I stepped back and said, "I'm taking care of people one person at a time, which is very rewarding personally, it makes you feel really good at the end of the day. But I have a bigger obligation to the healthcare system and to women in general." And I, in the end, stepped up to the plate and moved across the country to try to begin to address some of the structural and systemic issues that have been going on in medicine for a very, very long time.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, those are brave choices, to leave something that you love, but then move to, I'll just say, a bigger stage, so that you can have the impact that you are expecting. In your background, Barbara, you've got a history of being at leadership levels, but also being the first at something, the first female president of AAGL, the first female physician leader at ACOG. What's it like to be first, from both advocating for women's health, but also as a female leader?

Dr. Barbara Levy:

So it's an interesting role, because the others don't know what to do with you. And it's difficult to kind of walk the line between getting along with everybody, and changing their view of the way we should approach our work. So it takes a lot of emotional intelligence to be able to read a room, read an audience, try to be strong without disenfranchising or intimidating. I've been told over and over again that I'm intimidating, and that just doesn't resonate with me at all. But people have said, "Well, but you're so smart. And you're so brilliant." And all these things. But what that really translates into is that I don't speak up in those places until I have really researched and carefully considered options, crafting an argument. And just a huge amount of work before any meeting or any encounter with colleagues, when you're the only woman at the table, to be sure that what you say can be heard, and that you have considered others' point of view.

Dr. Barbara Levy:

So I think it's always been a challenge that I've appreciated. I know that it's... I've certainly not always been successful at it, but you don't want to turn people off and yet, you want to represent your perspective so that people can begin to see a different way of doing things. I think that's really challenging. It's also really rewarding when it can be successful.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I'm not intimidated, Barbara, when I speak to you. But there is no question that you absolutely command respect when you do speak. And sometimes, I've seen this written about you, and other discussions, that when you speak, you speak loudly, you speak clearly, and you speak from a place of knowledge. So a lot of times I speak to women, and we always talk about confidence. That's one of those things that's a common theme, whether you have it, whether you don't have it. So where did your confidence come from? Where did you find your voice?

Dr. Barbara Levy:

You know, it's really interesting. I made a choice to go to Princeton University to join them as the second class of women. And my mother was really adamant that I should go to an all-girls college so that my voice could be heard, and so that I wouldn't be put down. My response to her was that, "I need to learn how to have a voice when I'm surrounded by men." Want to go into medicine. Medicine at that time was a very male-dominated field. And I said, "I need to learn how to do this." And the interesting thing about Princeton in the '70s was that they made a very, very strong effort to incorporate women as equals from the very beginning. And so we had small classes, we had places where speaking up was required. It was what you had to do to get your grades, to do what you wanted to do. So I think I set myself up, learned how to do it, and to learn certainly in that sort of an environment, you don't speak up unless you're sure that what you're saying is reasonable. You'll definitely embarrass yourself if you don't.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. Well, on that point, as we think about people like you, who are accomplished, who have broken barriers, who have done so much for advancing both the field you're in, but also for advancing women in leadership, sometimes I like to reflect back, and do those barriers need to still be broken? And so, let's move a little bit towards your profession, your expertise, women's health. So that as a field of medicine, is critically important to you. You're a known expert in this field. Is it still important in the same way that it was when you started out? And if so, why do we need to focus specifically on women's health?

Dr. Barbara Levy:

It's still vitally important. Women's health has been, and it still is, marginalized when it comes to research dollars. There is no Institute at the National Institute of Health for women. We fall within the NICHD was just the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development. And women are not just smaller men, any more than children are just smaller adults; but the research and the funding doesn't exist to support half the population. And most of the drugs and the devices, the things that are marketed today, even for conditions that disproportionately impact women, they were all researched in men.

Dr. Barbara Levy:

So things like for mental health, for depression, all of these medications were studied in men, and yet marketed to women. So when you look at the numbers of women and people of color that are in studies to approve a lot of these things, it's really embarrassing. And as a clinician, I know that women react differently to medications. And I think this is just critically important. We talk about evidence-based medicine, but the evidence is only as good as the studies that provide the data for the evidence. And if people of color and women are not included in those studies, then the evidence doesn't apply to us. So I still think it's critically important that we focus on inclusion, including women, including people of color in studies to inform medicine.

Laurie McGraw:

So from that perspective, and so advocating for women's health and the specific focus on that, remains still relevant, remains still important. We're not done, in terms of progress.

Dr. Barbara Levy:

We're not even close.

Laurie McGraw:

Progress that needs to be made. Let's go back to leadership and women in leadership. From your perspective, you wouldn't be where you are without breaking barriers, without overcoming challenges. Can you give a perspective on a time that you had, let's just call it a breakthrough moment, something that was important to you to establish yourself as that next-level leader, whether it's a female leader, or just a leader in general?

Dr. Barbara Levy:

So I think in general, at least through my career, I've always had to work harder than those at the table, maybe for my own confidence, but maybe also to gain visibility. I think certainly in many of the roles when I was younger, I either became invisible, so a token, or I did a lot of the work in advance, so that I was prepared with a perspective and a point of view that I wanted to advocate for.

Dr. Barbara Levy:

And I have specific and very painful memories of being just totally shot down and put down by people who hadn't done the research, and hadn't looked at things, and being told that I was just flat out wrong. And going back and trying to decide, "Okay, how am I going to approach this? How am I going to tell the chair of my department that what he said at a meeting to put me down was actually wrong?" And going to my residents, to people that were senior to me and saying, "What do I do?" And what they said, "Well, you do nothing. You never confront power with the reality of what they've done." And I swallowed that at the time when I was in my early twenties. I don't swallow that anymore. What I do is try to work to gain the support and respect of other people. It's very challenging when you know you're right, and you're being told flat out by someone in power that you're just wrong.

Laurie McGraw:

So having lived that experience from early on in your career development, do you feel that that's the same advice you need to give to younger women today? Or do you feel that they have different, whether it's tools or opportunities to handle those types of situations in today's environment?

Dr. Barbara Levy:

I think it depends on the environment you're in. There's some good data to show that if over a third of the people sitting around a table are female or black, or just pick the minority, that changes the dynamic, and voices are heard in a different way. So I think a lot of it does depend on the particular situation. I still think there are tons of boards out there that have a token: a token black person, a token woman. And under those circumstances, I think people have to do exactly what I've had to do, which is, do a lot of extra homework and do a lot of behind the scenes, and rallying the troops and getting support.

Dr. Barbara Levy:

I can clearly remember for years, finding a like-minded man on a board that I was sitting on, and putting the idea in his head, and discussing with him in advance about how he would bring it up at the board meeting, because if I brought it up, it wouldn't be considered at all. And if he brought it up, it would be discussed, reviewed, and considered. So I think it depends on the situation. And we know that certainly in industry, it's still the norm that white men dominate boards and positions of power. So I think a lot of the things that I've had to do are things that women still have to do, unfortunately.

Laurie McGraw:

Yeah. And I think that in terms of just talking about it, and the types of advice that you give to other people to have confidence in the conversations that they bring to the table, is really great advice, Barbara. I certainly appreciate that. Some of the things that you have talked about in your career; again, and I say this from knowing you, and I say this from just reading things that you've written about, or been interviewed about in the past, you've always made time for mentoring others. That's always been from the early days important to you in your career development. Why is that so important?

Dr. Barbara Levy:

So I don't think I would be where I am without mentors. And sometimes people will mentor you for a while and then you become successful, and they become enemies. But I always think that paying it forward is important. I also think that mentoring other people helps get rid of burnout. It's so rewarding to work with people and help them see the "aha" moments, and become successful themselves. So to me, it's who I am. I've never been one of those women who would try to keep other women down. The more women that are successful, it floats all boats, and it makes life easier for a lot of us. So I find that mentoring is, personally, it gives me that same kind of personal reward that taking care of individual patients used to give me. It's a one-on-one relationship with someone, and you could really make a difference in their lives. And to me that's really rewarding. It's feel good, but it's also paying forward what people have done for me.

Laurie McGraw:

Another thing that you recommend, in terms of advice that you give to other physicians, is to get involved in leadership. You spend a lot of time thinking about and talking about burnout. And leadership, I've read, that you believe that that is a helpful avenue for physicians. I don't know if it's controlling the conversation. What would you say about that?

Dr. Barbara Levy:

Yes. I really do believe that. I think that physicians have abdicated our position of leadership over the last 20, 30 years. It used to be that physicians were the leaders in hospitals. We were the Chief of Staff, people listened to us, and paid attention to what we said. We were community leaders. And over the last 30 years or so, as the practice of medicine became more and more burdensome with requirements on us, all these other things we had to do besides taking care of patients, that the response by the medical community has pretty much been to put the blinders on, and to just take care of patients, and get rid of those other roles. But I think that makes us feel like victims, and it makes us feel like we're part of a system we can't control. And I think it's that lack of control that gives us burnout.

Dr. Barbara Levy:

Yes, the burnout comes from wanting to do a lot of technical and administrative tasks that are not interesting, not fun, but it also comes from that sense of just no control, and no ability to influence what even when it comes to my patient. Because after all, the administration says I have to do X, Y, or Z. The reality is, you don't. But you have to speak up, and you have to advocate. And I think it starts with advocating for individual patients when, either an insurance company or a health system is putting barriers in their way, keeping them from getting the kind of care you think they need to get. But I also think it is in accepting the leadership roles, the volunteer roles. Part of being a doctor is being a teacher, and it's being a member of a community that improves health of the world we live in.

Laurie McGraw:

Well, I like the advice of encouraging leadership just generally. I think it's a wonderful thing for women in particular, to focus on. It's great opportunities ahead when women do get involved in leadership. So I appreciate that advice and encouragement. Barbara, this has just been terrific talking to you. As we close out here, the reason I wanted to do this Inspiring Women podcast is to speak to women who are accomplished like you, at the pinnacle of their careers, but also to speak to younger women who are just starting out. What closing advice would you give for younger women who are beginning their professional careers?

Dr. Barbara Levy:

So I think being true to yourself is so important. So often, we are tasked with trying to be something that's not natural for us, or that doesn't work for us. And I think finding your own style, not trying to match someone else's style. But also being anchored in the emotional intelligence, and not being afraid to bring that perspective to the table.

Dr. Barbara Levy:

I think that the culture of a place where you go to work is as, or more important than, its reputation. So I advise my mentees to pay attention to relationships, to the people. What's

important to them? How do they go about their day-to-day? How do they treat the people who work with them? Because surrounding yourself with like-minded people, and people who value other human beings, I think, helps us all feel better at the end of the day. Also helps us take leadership roles. It's very difficult to take a leadership role in a culture that puts you down or dismisses anything you have to say. And so, making choices to trust our instinct, to trust our emotional intelligence, I think is, is really important for young leaders. And not try to beat your head against a wall in a situation that's not going to work out.

Laurie McGraw:

Barbara, that is great and sound advice. And I really appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today. Thank you so much for your comments. If folks want to follow you, where can they connect with you Barbara?

Dr. Barbara Levy:

On LinkedIn. I have a LinkedIn page, and on my email. I'm generally pretty responsive to people. Again, I love the mentoring and the outreach. So that's another way.

Laurie McGraw:

Thank you very much for your time today, Dr. Barbara Levy, on Inspiring Women.

Dr. Barbara Levy:

My pleasure, Laurie.

Laurie McGraw:

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