Research inequalities

ATTRACTIONg women into science – and keeping them there – is important across all scientific disciplines, but it could be particularly important in the veterinary field because of the high proportion of women entering the veterinary profession and because the way scientific careers are structured tends not to favour veterinary clinicians (of either sex) aiming to reach a senior level. It has long been argued that a ‘glass ceiling’ exists for women working in science, engineering and technology; in a government-commissioned report called ‘SET fair’ published in 2002, scientist and peer Baroness Greenfield memorably likened their career structure to a ‘leaky pipe’ in which ‘at each level of seniority, fewer women than men make it to the next level’ (VR, December 7, 2002, vol 151, p 681). If the proportion of women entering the veterinary profession is higher than in other disciplines, and research career structures present specific obstacles for veterinary researchers anyway, where are the leading veterinary scientists of the future to come from?

These thoughts are prompted by an article in the The Guardian last week by Jenny Gristock, a researcher and freelance science writer. Headlined bluntly ‘Why aren’t there more women in science? The industry structure is sexist’, her article is not specifically concerned with veterinary science, but is well worth reading nonetheless.1

The article was prompted by an editorial in New Scientist,2 commenting on a study published in The BMJ which had looked at trends in female first-authorship of papers published in high impact medical journals between 1994 and 2014. This had found that, while the representation of women among first authors of research papers was higher in 2014 than 20 years before, this had levelled out and, for some of the journals, was going down. This, despite the fact that female representation in the medical profession had increased substantially over the same 20-year period.3

Although such findings usually result in calls to encourage more women to take up science, the situation is, as Dr Gristock points out, rather more complicated than that. Indeed, she points out, there are more women in science than ever before, and she cites figures suggesting that women form the majority of those studying a wide range of biomedical and other scientific subjects, including ‘a whopping 77 per cent of students studying veterinary science’. Rather than encouraging more women into science, the scientific community, she argues, needs to put more effort into changing its hiring procedures, grant-allocating processes and publishing routines, which, as things stand, discriminate against women.

Dr Gristock is not alone in making such arguments. In 2014, following an inquiry on the subject of women in scientific careers, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee reported that, more than a decade after Baroness Greenfield’s ‘SET fair’ report, it had not been able to uncover any new issues on the topic of gender diversity in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM); this, it suggested, indicated that ‘the problems and solutions have long been identified, yet not enough is being done to improve the situation’. The committee found it ‘astonishing’ that ‘despite clear imperatives and multiple initiatives to improve diversity in STEM, women still remain under-represented at senior levels across every discipline.’

The committee identified a number of factors that conspired to ensure that women continued to be under-represented in science, particularly at professorial level. These ranged from problems caused by short-term contracts for postdoctoral researchers and the difficulties of taking career breaks at what, for many women scientists, might be a crucial stage of their career, to structural problems and perhaps unconscious biases that might affect recruitment to permanent and more senior posts. It also pointed out that, while competitiveness might be good for science, ‘careers should not be structured in such a way that talented women are deterred from remaining and progressing in STEM.’

Andrew Millar, the committee’s chairman, said on publication of the report of its inquiry that, while some universities were doing a good job in improving working conditions for women scientists, others were not, and ‘it’s time for universities to pull their socks up’ (VR, February 15, 2014, vol 174, p 154).

Some of the (non-gender-related) challenges relating to veterinary research were discussed at a symposium organised by the UK’s Veterinary Schools Council in November last year, where concern was expressed about the number of vets involved in research and the amount of veterinary research being done (VR, December 5, 2015, vol 177, p 554). Part of the solution might be to develop a postgraduate career structure for veterinary clinician scientists, as discussed in a Viewpoint article by Richard Mellanby and others published in Veterinary Record the week before (VR, November 28, 2015, vol 177, pp 544-547). One way or another it is important that these challenges are overcome, as veterinary research must continue to be able to compete effectively in the scientific research environment overall. Meanwhile, the good news is that, for all the apparent difficulties, female veterinarians can still make it to the most senior levels in science, as illustrated by the recent election of Sarah Cleaveland, of the University of Glasgow, as a Fellow of the Royal Society (see p 600 of this issue).

As far as the position of women in academia in general is concerned, it is good to see that at least one university has recently made an effort to ‘pull its socks up’. Various newspapers reported last week that, in what may be a first for the university sector in the UK, the University of Essex is to award female professors a one-off pay rise, in an attempt to bring their salaries in line with those of their male counterparts. Perhaps other universities should follow suit.


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