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Scrubs & Heels: How an Organization Aims to Close Gender Disparities in GI

Dr. Nandi:

Welcome to *IBD GI Insights* on ReachMD. I'm your host, Dr. Neil Nandi. While we have made tremendous strides in closing gender disparities in the field of gastroenterology, we still have a lot of work to do. Drs. Aline Charabaty and Dr. Anita Afzali have recently formed Scrubs & Heels, a women's leadership organization that helps to promote networking opportunities and professional growth for women in gastroenterology. Dr. Charabaty is an Assistant Clinical Director of Division of GI at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and the Clinical Director of the IBD Center at Sibley Memorial Hospital. Dr. Anita Afzali has been the former Medical Director of the Ohio State IBD Center and is now just transitioning to become the Executive Vice Chair of Internal Medicine and the Associate Chief Medical Officer at the University of Cincinnati.

Dr. Charabaty and Dr. Afzali, welcome to the program.

Dr. Charabaty:

Thank you for having us, Dr. Nandi.

Dr. Afzali:

Yeah. Thank you so much. We're excited to be here.

Dr. Nandi:

I am excited to have you guys on. We've been looking forward to this for some time. And I think this is a really important topic that we really need to discuss, and I'm so proud to know you guys outside of the podcast and see what work you've done. You know, GI has really traditionally been a male-predominant field, but we've made some strides in rebalancing those scales, but we still have a lot more advancement that we need to do. Can I start with you, Aline? Why does this still persist in the year 2022?

Dr. Charabaty:

That's a good question, Neil. I think to be honest, gender disparity in terms of pay or leadership roles or opportunities is not unique to GI or to medicine. Right? We still see this across all professions and across societies, so as long as there's the status quo across the board it's unlikely for things to change. And simply waiting for others, and by others I mean men, to spontaneously fix things for women, it's not productive. It's not going to happen. We are blessed to have amazing male allies like you, but we need to do something different. And women traditionally have been taught by society to not ask, that it's rude, it's not proper to ask for more, it's good to have what you have and be satisfied with it, so it's important for us to really change the narrative at all levels, and this is really what we want to do with Scrubs & Heels and what we're doing with Scrubs & Heels. So what we really want is to encourage men to be effective allies of women, to really understand that women are struggling, and we are looking for partnership and allyship with the men that are leaders in medicine and in GI, so we really want to encourage men and leaders in the field to actively and intentionally sponsor women, promote women, ensure pay transparency and equal pay because it is really the right things to do, because having a diverse leadership, having a diverse workforce is absolutely critical in order to help the field of GI advance in the right direction and in order to serve the population that is coming to us for medical care.

But obviously we want to also empower women to stand up for themselves and for other women. We really wanted to give women in GI the tools and the mindset to move things forward in their career, to really design their career in a way that fits their need, their value, their vision, their life event, and to be successful in their profession in the way they define what success means.

Dr. Nandi:

Well, absolutely, and these are incredibly important things that we need to do. And I'm going to direct this question to Anita. What can men do more of? Like what are more tangible things that we should be really looking out for in terms of promoting our female colleagues in the workplace?

Dr. Afzali:

Yeah. Thank you, Neil. Far too often, and we've seen this in literature where it's been described where women are over-mentored and under-sponsored, and so really we're trying to intentionally change those efforts by having our male allies be more involved with being and serving as a sponsor, absolutely continue to serve as a mentor, but then to allow for opportunities for engagement of their female colleagues into the workforce, into leadership opportunities, into that next research grant or that opportunity to give the grand rounds speaking event or a program, etc., so really being intentional with the efforts of sponsorship is what I think our male allies can help with. Further is being able to appropriately promote her and cite her. We've talked about this and the literature almost demonstrates that unfortunately, females are underrecognized when there is an opportunity where they should be appropriately recognized, so ensuring that the work of our female gastroenterologists and colleagues are being recognized and appropriately valued and respected is also necessary, and this happens at all fronts, from our male allies as well as female colleagues within the community. We all need to, once again, be very intentional in recognizing that we have to promote one another. We need to empower each other. We need to support each other as well.

Dr. Nandi:

Absolutely. I want to use some of this time to talk about what differentiates Scrubs & Heels from some of the other leadership platforms that are available for clinicians in general or those others that might be focused on women. What's the secret sauce?

Dr. Charabaty:

This is a great question, and I think we did hit the secret sauce. When Anita and I decided this is what we're going to do, the key thing that was driving us was one of the things that we wished someone had told us or taught us when we went into medical school or graduated from residency or fellowship or started a job or transitioned into a new job; we wished someone empowered us with the right knowledge, with the right skillset, what doors do we wish someone opened for us, so we really designed our agenda with that in mind. You know, there's no point in every generation going through the same struggle as the prior one, and we really wanted to use our experience and the barriers that we face and how we overcome them to help the next generation, but not just the next generation, really all generations. We're all learning from each other, and nobody has it completely figured out, and we really wanted to have that conversation: How can we learn from each other? If someone was successful in a certain path or with certain skills, let's share it. Let's learn from each other.

I think one other thing that is different about this is that beyond knowledge and beyond leadership skills, one of the keys to a successful career and a happy, satisfying career is really to develop a strong professional network across all stakeholders in GI, right? With gastroenterologists, with GI societies, with industry, with surgeons, with nutritionists, etc., really to have a strong professional network, so we were very intentional in creating time for networking with leaders of GI societies, with industry, with nationally recognized gastroenterologists but also with colleagues, with residents, with fellows, really create that opportunity to network and to give everyone the opportunity to be sponsored and mentored but also to sponsor and mentor.

Dr. Nandi:

I love this on so many different levels, absolutely. For those just tuning in, you're listening to *GI Insights* on ReachMD. I'm Dr. Neil Nandi, and I'm sitting down with Drs. Anita Charabaty and Dr. Anita Afzali, and we're speaking about their organization Scrubs & Heels, a dynamic women's-first leadership and networking organization that helps them find new opportunities and personal/professional growth.

Anita, I want to ask you, one of the things that I love that I saw on the program itinerary and in a lot of the tweets that were coming out of the conference were about supporting women's professional careers that are not within the traditional, avenue of academic track or academic growth. Can you speak a little bit about that? Why is it important to foster those interests? And how does Scrubs & Heels help them support their growth?

Dr. Afzali:

Yeah. Thank you. So I think each of us has and follows our own journeys, and it's these specific journeys that brings us joy. As Aline mentioned, we want to keep that joy in medicine and in our profession and in our lives, and so being able to share each other's journeys, experiences, and learn from one another, that's exactly what Scrubs & Heels is committed to. So we want appropriate representation from mixed backgrounds. We want to ensure that the tribe of women and male allies and sponsors and colleagues are all joining and sharing what perhaps different pathways they have taken that have brought them joy because maybe, perhaps, as you are sharing your unique pathway, maybe there's someone in that group or in that tribe who also is hoping to do something similar. Maybe there's someone in that group who wants to write a book and you've written a couple books. Right? Or perhaps there's someone who wants to start a new business venture that's even outside of medicine and they're trying to explore the basic steps of how to. So once we created the Scrubs & Heels tribe, we're ensuring that this network is available for each other, and we're allowing that networking to happen as a continuous year-round process.

We certainly recognize the importance of having different sessions or panels or symposiums at different events and programs. Those are extremely valuable, but what we are hoping to continue to do with Scrubs & Heels is an ongoing effort to share experiences, share our journey and, perhaps, teach and learn from one another. We're also developing future podcasts. That's in the works. We have a matrix mentorship program to be available as an ongoing effort to intentionally be able to share experiences, teach, learn from one another, support, and sponsor each other. So these are all the different, many variable ways that we're ensuring that history is in the making and how change is happening and how women in the field of gastroenterology can be better represented, encouraged, empowered, and supported.

Dr. Nandi:

That's fantastic. Before we close, is there one piece of advice that each of you can share for any of our female listeners that you'd like to have them impart and take away and apply to their daily lives?

Dr. Charabaty:

Well, I would say, be yourself. Don't apologize for who you are and for what you want for your career and for your personal life. Find the right allies in your work but also in your family and friends who help you grow and really reach your full potential, and design your work and your life the way you envision it.

Dr. Afzali:

Yeah. I will definitely echo those sentiments as far as being your authentic self, recognizing that only you are the perfect you, and so give yourself some grit and grace and go with it, go for it. Why not you? This is your time. Make that change. There's absolutely no one you need to ask for permission in order for you to do it. I just hope that we can continue to provide that form of empowerment and inspiration for each other because that's absolutely the mission of Scrubs & Heels: of really recognizing that no one should feel alone, that there is an entire tribe supporting you, rooting you and cheering you on, so go for it.

Dr. Nandi:

You heard it right here, folks. Be authentic, be passionate, be yourself, and go out there. You have a whole community, more than you can possibly know, that is rooting for your success. You can learn more about Scrubs & Heels at [ScrubsandHeels.com](https://scrubsandheels.com). I want to thank our guests for spending their time with us and showing us what Scrubs & Heels is all about. We have a lot to learn. Anita, Aline, thank you so much for being on the show.

Dr. Afzali:

Thanks for having us.

Dr. Charabaty:

Thank you, Neil. This was fantastic. You have always been a fantastic friend and male ally, and it was just a pleasure to share our experience with what we're doing with you today.

Dr. Nandi:

It's my pleasure. For ReachMD, I'm Dr. Neil Nandi. To access this and other episodes in this series, please visit ReachMD.com/GIInsights where you can Be Part of the Knowledge. Thanks for listening.