

Ana Maria FERRARI

Uruguay



'I agreed that it was better to stay because we wanted to preserve some of the good things that were being done.'



In 2002, Dr Ana Maria Ferrari, Professor of Paediatrics, became the first woman Dean of the Universidad de la República's Medical School in Montevideo, Uruguay. Her rise to become a role model for women in the medical profession was a popular one with her colleagues. But it has not been an easy path, particularly in a country so affected by political turmoil in it's recent past.

During Uruguay's years of military dictatorship from 1973 to 1985 many doctors fled the country, while others were the target of victimisation, even imprisonment. Dr Ferrari was one of the lucky ones who was able to continue working, which helped to keep the health care services going. However, she recounts that these were exceptionally difficult years.

'It wasn't easy. There were many rules which were completely unacceptable. As physicians who chose to stay in the country, we often contemplated whether we were not unwise to do so. However, during every period of doubt we found comfort in the possibility that the bad times would pass. The most difficult was to think of our colleagues in jail and those who had to flee the country. We suspected that those in jail were being maltreated. It indeed was a dark period in our country's history.'

Dr Ferrari had wanted to be a doctor since the age of seven. As the eldest of seven children, she was influenced by her father, who was a professor of internal medicine. She went to school in Montevideo, did her medical training there and has spent her

entire career in the city. She began working in the physiology department in the school of medicine, combining this with her career as a paediatrician at the children's hospital. She went on to teach and to publish many papers on paediatrics.

During the years of military rule, there was a problem with the standard of care in the public health sector. There was a lack of funding, too few nurses and barely any hospital maintenance. It was only on the return of civilian rule that the better times reappeared. Those doctors who had left the country returned and were assimilated back into the country's health care system.

In 1990 Dr Ferrari became professor of Paediatrics. 'I never really felt it had been difficult for me because of discrimination. I always had an easy relationship with my male colleagues.'

Her appointment as dean was the result of unanimous recognition and vote from professors, physicians and students alike. But it meant she faced new challenges of bureaucracy and the constant struggle for funding. It has been the lack of sufficient finance and constant pressure from negative publicity in the media that have been the major problems facing her. 'The rest is stimulating,' she says.

Dr Ferrari continues as dean until 2006, when she will be 65. Three years later she will also have to retire as a paediatrician. But she has no regrets and looks forward to pursuing her leisure life of reading and travelling.

Looking back at her time in practice, she says she found the most difficult aspects of medicine keeping up to date and giving patients bad news. She believes that the biggest change has been in the relationship between doctors and patients.

'This relationship used to be much closer. People had a family doctor or a family paediatrician. Now the practice has become more impersonal. Doctors work mostly in institutions and people tend to be looked after one day by one doctor and next time by another doctor.'

She also says there has been a huge increase in legal claims for malpractice. 'That is something that did not exist when I started. Now many doctors are afraid if they do this or that. It's very bad for medical practice.'