Orthopaedics: A specialty with 388 current active surgeons in Aotearoa New Zealand of whom just 25 (6.4%) are women. This is a pretty dismal statistic given that women represent more than 50% of our medical school graduates. We acknowledge that not everyone has a strong interest in orthopaedics and that it is possible that a greater number of female doctors may genuinely be more interested in other areas of medicine. However, the issue is about ensuring that those that do have the interest and the potential to become great surgeons are not discouraged by feeling as if they do not belong.

With the current gender inequality in orthopaedics, we are missing out on potential talent and the benefits of diversity. In addition, there are few Māori and Pasifika surgeons in Aotearoa New Zealand and only one openly gay practicing orthopaedic surgeon. Beyond even the sense of fairness and equity or the moral imperative, we know that diversity benefits organisations. Diverse groups make better decisions and experience improved creativity, performance, collaboration, and innovation. In step with this, the 30% Club is an established global campaign to improve female representation at board level in the world’s biggest companies. Evidence based studies have shown that improving diversity, in orthopaedics specifically, leads to higher quality patient care and better outcomes.

New Zealand orthopaedics is not unique in this position, with women constituting 5–10% of the orthopaedic workforce in most developed nations. A global survey of the International Orthopaedic Diversity Alliance (IODA) in 2020 showed only five countries (Estonia, Sweden, Brunei, Canada and Malaysia) reached 10% or more. Estonia is way out in front at 26%. A study in 2018 concluded that overwhelmingly orthopaedic surgery was perceived by New Zealand 4th year medical students as the specialty least accepting of females. Students not only thought orthopaedic surgeons, Ngā Rata Kōiwi, now provide support, mentoring, advocacy and collegial advice to Māori trainees and pre-trainees. A newly formed group of Pasifika surgeons and trainees will also provide similar help.

A survey of all female orthopaedic trainees and junior consultant surgeons in 2022 confirmed over 80% reported a strong level of support from male colleagues. The most negative discrimination or behaviour experienced was overwhelmingly not in fact from male surgeons but from nursing staff. Female consultants in the past 10 years have also had more success obtaining public hospital appointments than their predecessors. These new female consultants around the country have made positive changes to the environment and dynamic of the teams they join.

At a national level, diversity and inclusion in orthopaedics is a hot topic with the NZOA (New Zealand Orthopaedic Association). Ngā Rata Kōiwi, LIONZ and our Māori cultural advisor are increasingly involved in trying to guide female role models, mentoring and availability of opportunities. They have also had more success obtaining public hospital appointments than their predecessors. These new female consultants around the country have made positive changes to the environment and dynamic of the teams they join.

Last year 24% of orthopaedic trainees in New Zealand were female. Over 20% of trainees were Māori or Pasifika. From 2016 to 2021, it has been statistically more likely that female applicants are successful. Disappointingly no females were selected in 2022. This has dropped the percentage of female trainees to 21% in 2023. This anomaly led to intense scrutiny of all aspects of selection and understandably a level of angst and distress from some prospective female applicants. The training board has spent a great deal of time focused on trying to minimise bias in assessment and interview as well as improving our ability...
to select for diversity when required. However, the predominant factor behind the low level of females in orthopaedics remains the low numbers who apply. We need to encourage and support a diverse range of junior doctors to consider a career orthopaedics. It is clear there is work to be done. It is particularly heartening to be able to disclose that 20 of 49 registrants for application this year are female.

The evolution of any change is slow and inevitably erratic initially. Momentum and consistency will grow over time. While it takes time to change individual attitudes and behaviours, we absolutely see collective departments around the country becoming more inclusive in their actions and culture. Orthopaedics is getting there.

The evolution of change is not uniform.

Breaks heal at varying rates
But the direction remains clear
We will achieve strong union.

References
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- Dawson Muir is an orthopaedic surgeon in Tauranga. He is Chair of the NZOA Education Committee, a member of the Specialty Orthopaedic Training Board and an NZOA council member. He enjoys a hectic existence and when not at work is kept busy enjoying time with his wife and three kids. He loves relaxing in the outdoors, and most outdoor activities, especially running and skiing. Dawson is terrible at golf.
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