

# Men are doctors and women are nurses. Right? Of course not, but is this what primary school kids really think?

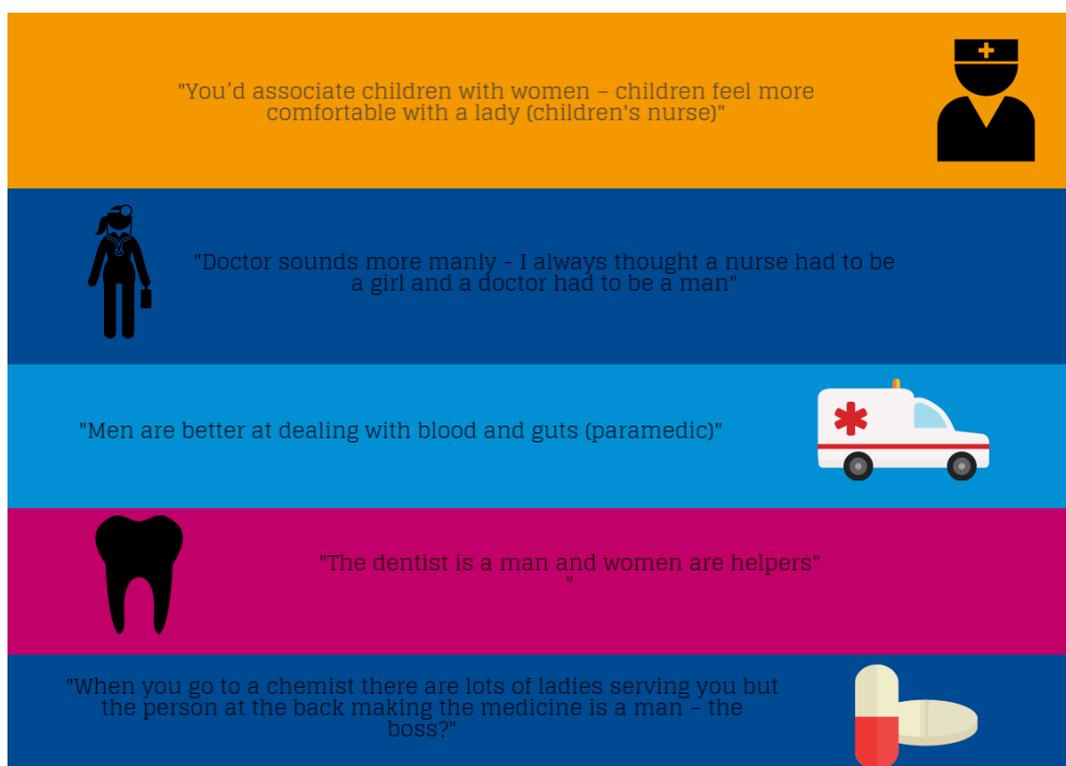
Darren Aldrich, strategy and communications lead for Health Careers, suggests that it is and asks the question – does it really matter?



## “Men are more focused, girls are all over the place; they might get distracted”

Health Careers commissioned some research recently to find out how we can reach out and engage with primary schools, starting with checking current awareness of health roles and how stereotyped children’s views are.

The above was a comment from an eight year-old girl when quizzed on why she thinks men are more likely to be surgeons, one of many comments illustrating primary school children’s gender stereotypical views of health professions. In fact, when shown images of men and women and asked to choose the surgeon, a staggering 72% of over 700 seven to eleven year olds picked a man. This figure rose to 80% among girls. Seven out of ten kids also picked images of women when asked to identify the children’s nurse. But statistics only show half the issue. Some of the responses show the deep-rooted gender stereotypes held by our young people.



Source: *Perceptions of health careers in primary schools (Health Education England and Kids Connections, 2016)*

### It's fair to say we're still recovering from the shock... Why does it matter?

Of course the primary schoolers in this research are very young and our views change as we get older don't they? Of course they do but with 80% of the NHS workforce being female, and nursing being the largest professional group, these gender stereotypes formed in our early years continue to influence our career considerations and decisions in later life.

We are seeing change. The gender balance in medical student numbers is better than ever. Some ambulance trusts are reporting a 50/50 gender split in their student paramedics. But if you drill down into certain professional groups, the imbalance is as stark as ever.



## Equality and diversity are crucial

Let's be honest. The health and social care system is facing many pressures and priorities so does this really matter? I think it does. Some might argue that the most important thing is having a workforce in sufficient numbers with the right values and skills. But we also want a workforce that reflects the communities it serves. Equality and diversity are crucial to this. It breeds innovation and creativity leading to better health outcomes.

If we really want a diverse workforce with the right skills and values, we need to do better in challenging stereotypes of our professions, starting in our primary schools. We also have a social responsibility to make sure that our youth are not discounting a career because of a misconception. Young people should be keeping an open mind about their future career opportunities not ticking it off because it is a job for a girl or a career for a boy. Do we really want an eight-year old girl thinking she can't be a paramedic because 'she is not big and muscular'? Or a ten year old boy not considering nursing because 'it is a caring profession and women are better at caring'?

## Taking action

So what can we do? There are already some fantastic programmes such as Primary Futures and Inspiring Women, run by the Education and Employers Taskforce, who also inspired this work with their film 'Redraw the balance' that was viewed over 25 million times in its first three months. These programmes bring employers and schools together to inspire young people but

the number of health and social care staff involved is relatively low. We all need to take bigger steps into schools and community groups and these programmes can support us.

We also need high-profile role models. Our research shows that girls and boys would be equally interested in becoming a chef. A possible influence on this is the mix of male and female chefs in the media. I am not saying that we can achieve the heights of the Great British Bake Off or Masterchef but there are inspirational health professionals who can challenge gender stereotypes. As workforce leaders, we need to help them become role models and inspire the next generation. We can also support primary school teachers in delivering the PSHE curriculum which asks schools to challenge stereotypes. Teachers tell us that there is a scarcity of resources and support in this area.

As the largest employer in the country, the NHS has a lot to win from taking action but we can't do it on our own. Real leadership is needed and that means not working in isolation. Other industries have similar issues with their professions – everything from the airline industry to construction, and from the armed forces to engineering. How can we find a way to work together and make a difference?

Finally, if you still think we should do nothing, ask yourself whether you are happy with ten-year old girls thinking men make better surgeons because they have “steadier hands”. I didn't think so.

**Darren Aldrich**

Strategy and communications lead, Health Careers, Health Education England  
Darren.Aldrich@nhs.net