

Frances Conley, Neurosurgeon Who Protested Sexism, Dies at 83

She was the rare woman in her field, and a tenured professor. But when a sexist colleague was promoted, she quit, forcing a reckoning in her profession.

By [Penelope Green](#)

Dr. Frances Conley [made national headlines in 1991](#) when she resigned from her position at Stanford University School of Medicine, saying that sexism had made her job untenable.

At the time, she was a tenured professor and one of the country's only female neurosurgeons. For decades she had played along as male colleagues fondled her neck, ran their hands up her legs and called her "hon" in the operating room. One offender made a habit of asking her to go to bed with him, thrusting his pelvis forward as he did so.

She had learned to banter with the worst of them — she felt it was the cost of success in a male-dominated field — but when a particularly egregious colleague was promoted to department head, she'd had enough. She was 50 years old, and, she said, she could not pretend "to be one of the boys any longer."

"I was tired of having my honest differences of opinion put down as a manifestation of premenstrual syndrome," she wrote in an opinion piece announcing her decision, published in several places, "of having my ideas treated less seriously than those of the men with whom I work. I wanted my dignity back."

Dr. Conley specialized in spinal surgeries and carotid artery blockages; her research focused on the immunology of brain tumors. Yet her greatest impact on medicine was her diagnosis of sexism at the institution she loved, which caused a reckoning across the country.

She died on Aug. 5 at her home in Sea Ranch, Calif., in Sonoma County. She was 83. Her death was [announced by Stanford in late September](#). Her nephew Ron Sann said the cause was complications of dementia.

"Stanford Brain Surgeon Quits Over 'Sex Harassment,'" read the headline in The San Francisco Chronicle, the first news outlet to report her resignation. The newspaper noted that Dr. Conley and her female colleagues had long been victims of sexual harassment.

Dr. Conley was furious at first by the use of the word "victim," she wrote in "Walking Out on the Boys," her 1998 memoir about the experience. She didn't feel like one. But the publicity that ensued emboldened women in medical schools and hospitals around the country.

They wrote to her in droves, thanking her for describing what they, too, had experienced and clamoring for change at their own institutions. It was decades before the #MeToo

movement forced a reckoning in the film world and other industries, and women in medicine had been staying silent so as not to jeopardize their careers.

Female nurses endured groping and nuzzling as they prepped for surgery, unable to bat away the grasping hands because doing so would compromise the sterile environment. Female students were often shut out of their desired specialties by professors whose advances they had spurned. Grievances filed with human resources often led nowhere; such was the case with two female members of the clerical staff at Stanford who had been groped by the same colleague, a man who had regularly propositioned Dr. Conley.

It was a slow reckoning, but Dr. Conley realized that she had been complicit in perpetuating a system of abuse by not speaking out, and she began to do so, not just to the news media but also in lectures around the country. Stanford supported her — sort of. When her colleague's promotion was rescinded a few months later, after multiple women came forth with their own experiences of his behavior, she relented and stayed on.

“Why had I been so blind?” she wrote. “If not blind, exactly, just willing to look the other way. Like most women, I hate confrontation. Up to 1991, my professional career had progressed because I was willing to be a ‘good sport’ and accept harassment.” She added, “I chose to join the existing system, and had used that system, created by and for men, very well.”

Frances Krauskopf was born on Aug. 12, 1940, in Palo Alto, Calif., one of four children of Kathryn (McCune) Krauskopf, a high school teacher, and Konrad Krauskopf. She grew up on the Stanford campus, where her father was a professor of geochemistry.

Frances attended Bryn Mawr College, outside Philadelphia, for two years and then transferred to Stanford, where tuition was free for faculty children. She graduated with a bachelor's degree in biology and then attended Stanford's medical school.

In an introduction-to-surgery class, she later recalled, the male professor announced, staring at Dr. Conley, “There are women who have finished surgical training, but there are *no* women surgeons.”

When she graduated in 1966, she became the first female surgical resident at Stanford. She initially considered specializing in plastic surgery, but a month's rotation as a neurosurgery intern changed her trajectory.

“A paralyzed patient walks, a mute stroke patient talks, a tumor patient borrows extra time,” she wrote. “I knew then this was what I wanted to do with my life.”

In 1977, Dr. Conley was the fifth woman to be certified by the American Board of Neurological Surgery. Five years later, she became Stanford Medicine's first female tenured

professor of neurosurgery — and the first woman at any U.S. medical school to hold that position.

She was still an undergraduate when she met Philip Conley, an Olympic javelin thrower and California Institute of Technology graduate with an M.B.A. from Harvard. She wanted to learn the sport and approached him on the field. They married in 1963.

Mr. Conley, who was working in the nascent tech industry, had been ready for marriage, but she had not been, being in the middle of medical school. He didn't yet anticipate, she wrote, how her degree would "irrevocably change the life he had envisioned for himself."

But he was the rare male who slowly adjusted his life to support his doctor spouse, as women had long done in marriages. Dr. Conley recalled her grueling years as a medical intern, when she was rarely home, and then only to catch a few hours sleep. On their third wedding anniversary, she stumbled in at 11 p.m. to find Mr. Conley asleep on the sofa and, on a table, a warm bottle of Champagne, unopened, and two flutes.

The couple decided they would not have children; Dr. Conley knew that her male colleagues in surgery rarely saw their own, and that when women academics stepped off the tenure track, they rarely got back on. Instead, the Conleys mentored generations of Stanford students.

The couple also became distance runners. In 1971, the first year women were included, they entered a race across San Francisco. Dr. Conley was the first woman to cross the finish line. "Palo Alto housewife" is how one newspaper described her in announcing her win. It was actually the second time she had run that race: A few years earlier, she had run disguised as a man, in an overcoat, and registered as "Francis," to hide her gender.

Mr. Conley died in 2014. Dr. Conley is survived by her siblings, Karen Hyde, Karl Krauskopf and Marion Forester.

"Fran was much more complex than most of the cartoons that have been created about her," John Adler, emeritus professor of neurosurgery at Stanford, said in an interview, adding, "She was a fighter, and she was instrumental in changing the field in important ways."

Yet nearly a half century after Dr. Conley received her board certification, female neurosurgeons are still rare; as of 2021, [according to one study](#), women represented only 8.2 percent of neurosurgeons practicing in the U.S., up from 5.9 percent in 2008. And in medical academia, full professors of neurosurgery who are women are even rarer. At Stanford, Dr. Odette Harris, who was promoted to professor in 2018, is the first female neurosurgeon to have attained that position since Dr. Conley did 36 years earlier.

“Half of the journey is modeling,” Dr. Harris said. “My experience could not have been possible without hers.”

Statistics on gender harassment are less rosy. [A 2023-24 study](#) by the Association of American Medical Colleges found that nearly one in three women reported experiencing sexual harassment in academic medicine.