

## Doctor by Doctor: *Star Trek: The Next Generation's* Dr. Beverley Crusher

### Introduction

As a medical doctor, I have embarked on a review of the doctors in the various *Star Trek* series. I have previously considered Dr. Pulaski (2013) and Drs. Boyce and Piper (2014) and now turn to Gates McFadden's character, generalist Dr. Beverly Crusher, from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987–94) and subsequent films. This series, set in the twenty-fourth century (2364–70 A.D.), approximately a century after the original series in the *ST* universe timeline, was created twenty-one years after the original series and comprised 178 episodes spanning seven seasons.

Crusher, the Chief Medical Officer of the starships *Enterprise D* and *E*, was a regular in all but the second of the seven seasons of the show. She was born in Copernicus City, on the moon, in 2324 (Landau, "Conundrum"), and has distant ancestors hailing back to Scotland (Beaumont, "The High Ground"). Her parents died when she was a young child and physician grandmother, Felisa Howard, raised her on a colony planet (Frakes, "Sub Rosa"). This colony was involved in a planetary impact with a large astronomical body which caused severe flooding with many casualties. When medicines ran out, Felisa, with Beverley's aid, resorted to herbs, roots, grasses, and other natural products for treatments. This awakened Beverley's interest in medicine, and after graduating at the top of her class from medical school, Beverly married and had one son. Her husband died when their son was 5 years old.

### The Feminization of Medicine

Jane Dacre, a former President of the Royal College of Physicians at the turn of the century, described the demographic change in the medical profession as a "tsunami of women coming through" (2001), a situation that still holds 15 years later. In the broadest sense, this is also echoed in *Trek*, where it is accepted that "among humans, females can achieve anything the males can" (Beaumont, "Suddenly Human").

This was not always so. From the Middle Ages onward, women mostly practiced obstetrics, folk healing, and alchemy. They were barred from enrollment into medical schools, and indeed, the admission of Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to receive a medical degree, in 1849 in New York State, was entirely by accident (Smith). However, Joseph Cacciottolo has noted that this change is to be expected. "More women are becoming consultants, and more female medical leaders are emerging. However this is a phase of reaching equality by bridging the gender divide, and not one of over-feminization" (1). Crusher thus highlights the feminization of medicine even in the future with more and more women joining this once traditionally male profession. *Star Trek: The Next Generation* in the 1980s therefore heralded

a new type of television physician, the intelligent and independent woman ... self-confident, beautiful, bright, thoughtful, and compassionate. Her character's role as lead physician and mother illustrated the changing occupational demographics of physicians and challenged the cultural adage that professional women cannot have it or do it all. (Petraný 132)

Indeed, Crusher embodies the new importance and ubiquity of female roles in the franchise. "Crusher has a son onboard the *Enterprise* and balanced running the medical facilities, being a single mother, having a love life, and participating in recreational activities such as weekly poker nights" (Montoya 28). Women could now have it all and participate equally with males while retaining the traditional role of mother and career.

Moreover, these new women wield power and are often principal protagonists. "Crusher also frequently drove the plot ... [and] displayed great strength and perseverance" (Montoya 29), such that women were no longer relegated to bit parts or supporting roles. "Picard's *Enterprise*, unlike Kirk's, has women on the bridge who actually wield expertise and authority and whose opinions count" (Lundeen and Wagner 91). However, the circumstances in which the doctor is originally deployed have been criticized because although three of the principal characters are female—the doctor, the counselor, and the security officer—the sum of their roles regresses them into "a matrix of protection not unlike that which maternal mammals provide for their young and for which, some might argue, we never outgrow our longing" (Lundeen and Wagner 91). They form an "umbrella of safety, health, and psychological security ... once associated with home and hearth" (*ibid*). It has thus been argued that ultimately, women remain relegated to traditional and supportive roles for their male counterparts. It has been argued that *TNG*

is more a reflection of women's lack of power in today's society than a vision of the future. The fact that non-gender stereotyped women feature in a number of different episodes but are not a permanent feature of the series on board the *Enterprise* is ultimately disappointing. The attribution of principal roles predicated on contemporary stereotypes of an essential female nature in which nurturance is a primary feature thus reinforces, rather than challenges, the paradigms of patriarchal myth. (Korzeniowska 24)

It can therefore be argued that these female characters participate in "tokenism" (Daly 334), whereby their appearance is a mere sop to feminist discourse. This is because

[m]en, nurtured and protected in this secure feminine

haven, can range into the larger world to conduct the business of technological mastery, political leadership, strategic dealings with the larger world, and the general pursuit of the community's ultimate aims and mission. Women meanwhile maintain the matrix, the frame within which the thoughts, feelings, and actions of the men stand for the human drama, the drama of everyman as everyperson. (Lundeen and Wagner 91)

However, this character has also been read in exactly the opposite way:

A feminist explains that she places Beverly Crusher among her top three favorite senior staff characters, because "the name [Crusher] says it all; I'm into ball-breaking women." The differing readings of Beverly speak to different cultural competencies within a humanist framework. (Santos)

Andrew Montoya takes a balanced, dispassionate, and analytical view. He notes that the

confidence and intelligence that Crusher exudes ... are traits that are typical of male heroes.... By portraying the female characters as heroes, TNG shows that women can be positive leaders and play vital roles in the working world ... represent[s] a major step forward for the women of *Star Trek*. (29)

Montoya reminds us that while these women "remained in traditional female roles of nurturers and healers [they] possess more power and influence than the women of *TOS*," a step in the right direction. He also acknowledges that

Though ... often still viewed as sexual objects, [they] accepted this and incorporated it into their lives ... displayed traits such as physical beauty, sexuality, understanding, patience, and a desire to nurture, and ... used these traits to perform their duties aboard the *Enterprise*. (29)

However, although women "had influence and power aboard the *Enterprise* in TNG," the era wherein the series were shot, i.e., 1987–94, still encapsulated a "society in which this *Star Trek* ... was not ready for a female to take a leadership role." Thus, while it was eminently welcome and not only "acceptable for women to excel in the working world and to even obtain prestigious and powerful positions, ... American society was still not ready to accept that women could hold top leadership positions" (29).

Montoya supports this contention by analyzing United States Congressional statistics from 1985 to 1993, wherein the highest number of women serving in the House of Representatives was 30 out of 435 and the equivalent number for the Senate was 3 out of 100, with both instances occurring in 1993. Montoya therefore concludes: "These numbers clearly show that America was not willing to place women in the highest leadership positions" (29). However, matters

would ameliorate with *Star Trek* eventually addressing "the ideas of females in command and the new issues raised by third-wave feminism" (29), to the extent of placing a woman in command of the center of action, the starship *Voyager* in *Star Trek: Voyager*.

### The Feminization of the Character

"Beverly's natural walk resembles that of a striptease queen" (Roddenberry 33). The "classy Dr. Beverly Crusher" (Forrest 79) was deliberately chosen to be an attractive woman, as described in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* series bible: "she happens to be a beautiful woman ... an additional asset ... and very female form" (Roddenberry 32). This is independently noted by Montgomery Scott, the original *Enterprise* chief engineer: "well, I say this about your *Enterprise*. The doctors are a fair sight prettier" (Singer, "Relics").

Crusher's femininity is occasionally explicitly used against her, such as when a powerful alien remarks that "Crusher gets more shrill with each passing year," a deprecating term reserved for bothersome women. The alien then promptly turns her into a barking Irish setter for a few seconds and then back to her original form, all without her even noticing (Scheerer, "True Q").

### Excellence while Caring

"It's Beverly's smile, it's her kindness, her beauty within and without. So much more than just Beverly" (Rush, "The Host"). Crusher is an extraordinarily proficient doctor, a crucial trait since she is ultimately "responsible for the lives placed in her hands every day" (Schrager 101). Thus, this character "begins a shifting image toward extraordinary competence, even infallibility" (Petrany 132), as expected of contemporary doctors in this era of instantaneous access to all knowledge. This expectation is repeated in subsequent *Star Trek* doctors such as the genetically enhanced Dr. Bashir in *Star Trek: Deep Space 9* and the computer-generated Emergency Medical Hologram in *Star Trek: Voyager*.

Crusher's expertise, however, never alienates or distances her from her patients. She "is a Florence Nightingale, caring for the sick and commanding only in the last resort" (Roberts 59). She works calmly "while operating scientific instruments and taking charge of the situation. She shows scientific knowledge and then displays confidence" (Montoya 29), the ideal doctor.

Moreover, by all accounts, Crusher is superhuman as "not only is she a terrific doctor and mother, but she is also capable of taking command of the starship and its crew when the other officers are on away missions" (Petrany 132). This is because Crusher had successfully completed a command training course, an unusual decision for a doctor in Starfleet but one that permits her to electively serve as the ship's duty officer (Kolbe, "Thine Own Self") and even actively command the ship in combat situations (Singer, "Descent").

I volunteered tonight. I like to put in a little Bridge time now and then, stay on top of operations, tactical pro-

cedures. The truth is, I like it. It's not every doctor who gets to command a starship, even if it is the night shift. [...] I never even thought about my rank for a long time. It seemed pretty trivial compared to being a doctor. But then, about eight years ago, I started to feel like I wanted to stretch myself a little. (Kolbe, "Thine Own Self")

Crusher's care and compassion often go beyond that which is strictly appropriate for a member of the medical profession. Like Dr. McCoy before her, Crusher's strong will often leads her to vociferously and defiantly defend the (not necessarily medical) underdog, thereby implicitly assuming the mantle of the ship's ethics officer. "As the voice of compassion on the *Enterprise*, Crusher's sense of justice is often at odds with the other officers in the command structure" (Schrager 101). Indeed, her role as devil's advocate often leads to acrimonious confrontations with the entire senior staff, including the ship's captain. Indeed, the doctor never becomes inured to disease, pain, and suffering. She exclaims: "Damn. Where are the calluses we doctors are supposed to grow over our feelings?" to which the rejoinder is "perhaps the good ones never get them" (Mayberry, "Code Of Honor").

It has thus been argued that Crusher "is shaped more by her femininity than by her medical, scientific training" (Roberts 8), an incorrect assertion as all Starfleet doctors actively champion Aristotelean "virtue ethics" (Grech 2013, "Philosophical Concepts").

Nevertheless, she remains on good terms with all of the senior staff to the extent of joining the ritual weekly poker game. Indeed, in many respects this doctor is truly multitented. She organizes and actively participates in the ship's theatre troupe and she is also a skilled dancer (Wiemer, "Data's Day"), a fact that she is reluctant to reveal onboard ship as she does not wish to be known by her old nickname

"the Dancing Doctor" (Kaeppler).

## Medical Ethics

Crusher's "fierce devotion comes from within. It can't be diminished" (Scanlan, "Skin of Evil"). The doctor is highly principled and is constantly led by virtue ethics, both in medical and in nonmedical matters (Hughes and Lantos 33).

Ethical issues are frequently invoked in ST and whether of medical or nonmedical nature, these issues are always championed by Crusher in the fashion of virtue ethics. Indeed, it has been estimated that 4 percent (7 of 177) of episodes of the *Next Generation* series directly addressed medical ethical issues, as opposed to none in *The Original Series* (Hughes and Lantos). This makes Crusher a cautious physician. She chastises a colleague who experiments on the sick (albeit successfully on the occasion in question):

You gambled, he won. Not all of your patients are so lucky. You scare me, Doctor. You risk your patient's lives and justify it in the name of research. Genuine research takes time. Sometimes a lifetime of pain-taking, detailed work in order to get any results. Not for you. You take short cuts, right through living tissue. You put your research ahead of your patient's lives, and as far as I'm concerned that's a violation of our most sacred trust. I'm sure your work will be hailed as a stunning breakthrough. Enjoy your laurels, Doctor. I'm not sure I could. (Chalmers, "Ethics")

Further, in "Symbiosis" she challenged both Captain Picard and Starfleet's "Prime Directive" when it was uncovered that the inhabitants of particular planet were keeping their neighbors addicted to a powerful narcotic in the belief that



The Two Doctors: Victor Grech meets Gates McFadden  
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this drug was a cure against a dreadful disease, a condition that was actually narcotic withdrawal. Crusher synthesized a nonnarcotic alternative that would end the situation, but the Prime Directive dictated that she not offer it (Phelps). She exclaims “it’s hard to be philosophical when faced with suffering.” McFadden commented on this specific episode, noting that it is “always the dilemma, non-involvement versus involvement. We live with that today in Bosnia and Rwanda. But my first duty in the show was to end suffering; my second duty was to the Prime Directive” (Schrager 107).

The doctor is selfless in her devotion to duty. When asked “if suddenly you could have anything you wanted, what would it be? ... think about it. Really think. If suddenly you could make anything happen, what would it be?” she replies “Well, I would probably want to heal people. People who are hopelessly ill” (Scheerer, “True Q”).

### Nonmedical Ethics

“It’s the struggle that’s important. That’s what helps us to define our place in the universe” (Frakes, “The Quality of Life”). A philosophical Crusher discusses life and what demarcates it in the following way:

Life is what enables plants and animals to consume food, derive energy from it, grow, adapt themselves to their surroundings and reproduce.... scientists and philosophers had been grappling with that question for centuries without coming to any conclusion.... I think I’m saying that we struggle all our lives to answer it. (Frakes, “The Quality of Life”)

This existential framework colors her innately deontological outlook toward life. For example, in “The Perfect Mate,” a female empath is involved in order to cement a truce between two warring planets (Bolex). Crusher is horrified to discover that this “empath metamorph” is a potentially perfect female mate, genetically designed to bond with a male mate, and is biologically incapable of preventing herself from transforming herself into her mate’s desires. She questions the captain: “How can you simply deliver her like a courier into a life of virtual prostitution? ... I’m surprised at you ... she has been conditioned since the day she was born to believe it’s perfectly acceptable to exist only to please men ... bred by those people to seal a treaty with a seductive coup de grace.” To which Captain Picard brings five sets of replies: “arranged marriages have been the basis of political alliances in many cultures, including our own ... she knows exactly what she’s doing ... she was born to do this.” Picard also argues that any interference with this arrangement would be a contravention to Starfleet’s Prime Directive. Moreover, this would “destroy any chance of peace between these worlds ... interfere in their society, their customs,” and that therefore, even this objectifying transaction must be completed for the greater good.

Feminists have argued that while *Trek* attempts to feature gender equality, female characters have it only insofar as “their independence is underwritten by traditional norms and authorized by men” (Joyrich 67). It has also been pointed

out that “normative heterosexuality is simply assumed; ... there is no question at all that this mate will be male—that her biological sensors are perfectly gauged to heterosexual demands” (Joyrich 67–68), as it is with Dr. Crusher herself.

### Temporary Departure from the Show

During the second season, McFadden was replaced by Diana Muldaur as Chief Medical Officer Dr. Katherine Pulaski. Crusher’s absence was attributed to her being promoted to Head of Starfleet Medical. The true reason was that the producers thought to replace Crusher with a character more in the cantankerous mold of DeForest Kelley (Schrager 183). However, McFadden returned to the role of Crusher in the show’s third season due to a lack of chemistry between Muldaur and the rest of the cast (Schrager 185).

### Love Interests

“Now that we know how each of us feels, perhaps we should not be afraid to explore those feelings” (Frakes, “Attached”). Dr. Crusher and Captain Picard are shown to be mutually attracted to each other in several episodes (Lynch, “The Naked Now”), and this unacknowledged affinity is finally exposed when they are telepathically linked (Frakes, “Attached”). However, their affection remains unrequited except in the future in another timeline where it is revealed that she had not only been married to Picard, but they had also divorced (Bole, “The Best of Both Worlds”).

The doctor also displays a penchant for falling in love with exotic aliens, including a noncorporeal being (Frakes, “Sub Rosa”) and an alien dual being (Rush, “The Host”). The latter episode depicts an initially male being that hosts a sluglike symbiote. When the host dies, Crusher is unable to pursue her romantic feelings with the new female host, for which this character has been accused of a degree of homophobia (Lovrich 69).

### Doctors in Star Trek

“Physicians evolved through a succession of changes that reflected shifting cultural perceptions of the medical profession as we moved into the twenty-first century” (Petrary 132), The depiction of doctors in *Trek* has metamorphosed with each new series.

In the first [1960s] iteration ... the physician ... was Dr. Leonard McCoy, a crusty Georgia general practitioner who did not trust technology, was a fierce advocate for his patients ... an ideal physician for the as viewed by the public at the time. The second iteration ... in 1987 [was] ... Dr. Beverley Crusher, a woman, fluent in technology and gifted with interpersonal skills, again reflecting the ideal as viewed by the public of the time. (Leach and Stevens 9)

Clearly, with every new iteration of the medical doctor in *Trek*, the series evolved such that they become “less human

and more technological and infallible. They evolve from the old country doc, McCoy, to the extraordinarily proficient Dr. Crusher" (Petrany 133).

Crusher's depiction is paralleled by the presence of a ship's counsellor who plays a vital role and "not only hints at the growing status of 'therapy' in American culture, but, as pointed out by various commentators, her role draws on such stereotypical 'feminine' traits as nurturance and sensitivity" (Lundeen and Wagner 91). However, McFadden attempted to resist the trend toward the portrayal of increasing technologization of medicine. The actress commented:

The hypospray became like a panacea for everything that went wrong. I knew we needed to work on things like bedside manner. Now [the sixth season] I always try to touch my patients physically, even if it's not in the script. Sometimes the writers will have me talking to someone else while working on a patient, and I always try to find another way. If I were the patient, I would find that annoying (Schrager 112).

To McFadden, this exemplified contemporary medicine and that which could be done to improve doctor-patient relations. "I wanted Crusher to be compassionate. I think people can stand pain and uncertainty so much better if doctors give you a moment" (Schrager 112).

Crusher "is in all respects a superwoman" (Petrany 132). However, despite her "extraordinary competence" (Petrany 132), Crusher is yet "another Starfleet woman who combines both her professional duties and a certain toughness with the traditional 'feminine virtues' of nurturance, constancy, and maternal care" (Loverich 66), to some extent therefore acceding to more traditional female stereotypes. Indeed, the actress commented on her role in this regard, stating that "there are still instances where women have all of the emotional parts, and I would prefer to see us a little more involved in the decision making" (Schrager 106).

Like all doctors in the show, Crusher excels not only as all potential medical specialists rolled into one (including a forensic pathologist capable of carrying out autopsies), but also an epidemiologist and a general biologist. She also doubles up as a veterinarian (McFadden "Genesis").

It must, however, be noted that "behind Dr. Crusher's blue eyes and mane of red hair lies a dancer, a romantic, a theatrical director, and a comedian" (Schrager 101), traits that not only feminize, but also humanize. These traits facilitate her "unique position among the cast as confidante, friend, and colleague" (Schrager 101), an all-rounder.

Crusher is just part of the ensemble that reifies Gene Roddenberry's vision of a potential utopian future. "It's more than just a blending of imagination and technology. He offered a real vision of hope, and he believed in the possibility of humanity. The world is actually a better place to live in" (Schrager 117).

All of the features and characteristics noted in the doctor greatly endeared this character with fans. Indeed, as with her predecessor, Dr. McCoy, "some fans ... considered Dr. Crusher a role model. McFadden said that one doctor she

met considered Crusher so inspirational, "She wanted my picture in the office" (Schrager 106). And this is confirmed by the following acknowledgement: "from you, I have learned to strive for excellence, no matter what the personal cost" (Scanlan, "Skin of Evil"). This is clearly an inspirational character not only within the franchise but also in the real world, a role that would behoove medical doctors of both genders to emulate. ▲

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