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Lady in the lab

Professor Barbara Casadei caught the science bug at school, and now she's inspiring the next generation. She tells Madeleine Bailey about her latest BHF honour and her exciting research into atrial fibrillation.

Barbara Casadei doesn't exactly fit the traditional stereotype of a science professor. Slim and elegant with long, blonde hair and oozing charisma, she'd look just as at home on the society pages of Tatler as in a lab. And of course, as a woman, she's still sadly a rarity in the higher echelons of academia.

A mere one in five UK professors is female, according to the Higher Education Statistics Agency – and, in science, the figures are lower still, at one in ten. This, she emphasises, is down to social conditioning and not ability.



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"There's no question that women can do science as well as men," she says. "But there's a lot of subtle messaging that implies science is for boys and the arts are for girls. As a result, girls aren't encouraged in the same way." Not that this deterred the young Barbara. "I loved the precision of science, where something was either right or wrong – or so I thought – but it probably also helped that my mum is a forceful character and never let me doubt that I could do well," she explains.

This is something of an understatement. A glance at Professor Casadei's CV – all 14 pages of it – is enough to give most of us an inferiority complex. Besides the newly awarded title of BHF Chair – given to 'individuals with outstanding cardiovascular research leadership qualities' – her achievements include nine awards and distinctions, starting in 1978 with an academic scholarship to study medicine at the Collegio Nuovo of the University of Pavia, Italy.

There's no question that women can do science as well as men

Now Professor of Cardiovascular Medicine at the University of Oxford, where she's been since her arrival in the UK in 1989, she divides her time between research, running the John Radcliffe Hospital's Hypertension Service, which looks after patients with hard-to-treat high blood pressure, and teaching.

"I love the mix," she enthuses. "Multitasking helps me to keep a balanced view of the issues. If you just work in the lab, it's easy to get lost in detail and do research for its own sake, but working with patients means you keep the ultimate aim in mind. The teaching is also great for keeping you on your toes – the students are amazing."

Initially, Barbara only intended to come to the UK for three months but, nearly 24 years later, she's still here. "My mentor, who had worked in the UK, inspired me to come over for a short time," she remembers. "But after six months, I loved it so much that I resigned from my permanent position in Italy for one here that wasn't secure."

Barbara in the lab



It was a risk that's certainly paid off. Within two years, she'd been awarded the Joan and Richard Doll Research Fellowship at Green College, Oxford, and went on to win multiple research prizes and research grants, becoming a professor in 2006.