

TO THE DAUGHTERS OF ASCLEPIOS

By

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*Medical Students
and Graduation 1975*

TO THE DAUGHTERS OF ASCLEPIOS

This afternoon at the graduation ceremony the graduates will be repeating an oath based on the historic Hippocratic Oath. It is the same oath to which they were introduced early in the first year of their lives as a medical students at UMKC. Though, because of this oath, we often think of Hippocrates as the Father of Western Medicine, it is Asclepios who is considered to be the principal God of Healing for the Western world.

The legend of Asclepios is an interesting one and relates that he was the son of a mortal woman and the God, Apollo. His mother was slain by Apollo's sister and Apollo arranged for the child to be raised by the centaur, Chiron, who taught him about the healing arts. It is said that he became so skillful that he even brought a dead man back to life and for this he was struck down by one of Zeus' thunderbolts and brought into the heavens as a God. Also according to the legend Asclepios had many children including two sons who became the patron gods of surgeons and physicians and two daughters who became goddesses of health and remedies. So beginning with that mythical time both sons and daughters of Asclepios have been connected to the healing arts.. The legend also tells

us that Aesclepios was so persuasive that a belief in him satisfied the need of people for a personal and compassionate god of healing and because of this many temples of healing were built in his name. Ruins of many of these still exist. Of his children, Hygeia, the goddess of health was most often worshipped and represented in art.

With the advance of civilization the paths of the sons and daughters of Asclepios went in different directions and the roles of the daughters became more and more restricted. Though women were often highly regarded as comforting healers, only their roles as midwives were regularly recognized. Very few women were officially accepted as full fledged medical practitioners before the middle of the nineteenth century. And, interestingly, it was in the United States that a woman first received a medical degree from a regular medical school. Elizabeth Blackwell was that woman and those of us in the medical profession owe her a tremendous debt of gratitude for her courage and her many accomplishments after she received that degree.

It was only after she had applied to 29 different American medical colleges that Elizabeth Blackwell was finally accepted in 1847 at the Geneva Medical College, located in Geneva, New York. This amazing event occurred when the faculty left the decision up to the all-male

student body, who, as a lark, voted that she she should be allowed to join them. Her descriptions of this period and also those of one of her fellow students tell us that she was very well accepted there, and that after the required two short terms she graduated with an official M.D. degree and was first in her class. She also spent a summer between the two years working at a Philadelphia Almshouse, and she describes this experience quite vividly in her autobiography. Unfortunately she could not find any way to get other clinical experience in a hospital or as an apprentice to a physician in the United States, and so she went to Europe to study. She found little opportunity in England but finally was accepted as an "aide" in a maternity hospital in Paris. While there she lost her sight in one eye due to an infection which came from caring for an infected infant. She did make some important contacts in England and later practiced there. When she returned to the United states she found no opportunities here. She finally opened an office in New York City and eventually a dispensary for poor women and children. Slowly she acquired patients and was later joined in her work by Dr. Marie Zakrzewska, a German midwife who had come to this country to get an M.D. degree, and her sister, Dr. Emily Blackwell who had received an M.D. from the Cleveland Medical College in 1853 followed by studies in Europe. These three brave, stalwart women eventually opened the New York Infirmary for Women and Children and later

established a medical college for women there in 1868.

Dr. Blackwell published her autobiography in 1895 but a friend had already published Dr. Zakrzewska's autobiographical letters before this in 1860. Dr. Zakrzewska's full autobiography was published posthumously in 1924 with a title of *A WOMAN'S QUEST*. I have had the privilege of reading these two autobiographies and found them so interesting that I began searching libraries for other autobiographies of early women physicians. I have now found life stories written by eleven women who received their M.D. degrees in the United States before 1900.

In a speech given in England in 1889 Dr. Blackwell noted that there were 3,000 registered lady-doctors in the United States at that time, when the number in England was a mere 73. Actually Elizabeth Blackwell was the first "lady-doctor" to be officially registered in England. This was possible because she had been born in England and had an official M.D. degree. British universities had been very slow to admit women, and in order to become registered a candidate had to have a university degree.

My initial introduction to autobiographical writing by early women physicians actually came long before :

became acquainted with Elizabeth Blackwell through her writing. A copy of an autobiography by Dr. Rosalie Slaughter Morton was given to me by my parents the year I enrolled in college as a pre-medical student. Dr. Morton graduated from the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1898 and her book entitled, *A WOMAN SURGEON*, was published in 1937. This story was an inspiration to me when I first read it and it remains so as it sits in a bookshelf in my office where I sometimes reread sections of it. It is dedicated to the daughters of Asclepius. I would like to read to you an excerpt from the preface:

"Women doctors during the past fifty years have held a special place in the field of medicine. They have helped to humanize their profession as well as to administer their scientific knowlege. A woman physician sees life without its mask. To be sure, all physicians do to a certain extent. But a woman gets closer to the inner thought of other women in understanding many domestic and social factors in illness. She understands youth's vagaries and aspirations better because her mother heart has scientific facts to support intuition and sympathy. One of the joys of a doctor's life is to see the human soul convincing itself that mentally and spiritually it will not admit defeat."

Dr. Zakrzewsha's formal autobiography, which was published after her death, was based on letters she wrote

and journals she kept during her lifetime. She is my favorite of these pioneer women physicians. Her importance lies primarily in her high ideals and her great efforts to obtain for women physicians educational opportunities equal to those of men. In her 72nd year Dr. Zak, as she was affectionately called, admitted that she could no longer understand the world of younger women doctors. She lamented the inability of younger women doctors to appreciate the experiences of older women physicians such as herself. It seems to be the fate of members of each generation--and I include myself-- to feel that the challenges and hardships they have experienced do not seem quite real to generations which come later.

Dr. Bertha Van Hoosen, who received her M.D. from the University of Michigan in 1888 described her life as a surgeon in Chicago in her lively autobiography, *PETTICOT SURGEON*. She helped develop and became chairman of the Obstetrics and Gynecology department at Loyola University in Chicago. When asked by a celebrated minister whether she was an orthodox liberal or a liberal orthodox she answered in this way:

" I will leave it to you--last week, on Sunday I baptized an unborm child of Catholic parents because its life was in danger. On Wednesday, I was the only woman

attending a Jewish circumcision, the parents refusing to have the mohel operate without my presence--on Friday with a tiny casket in my arms, I went alone to the cemetery with the body of a baby whose parents did not believe in funerals."

Dr. Alice Hamilton, another graduate of the University of Michigan, also practiced in Chicago where she was one of the pioneers in industrial medicine. In 1918 she joined the faculty of Harvard University as an assistant professor of industrial medicine. This was long before Harvard admitted women as medical students. The title of her autobiography is *EXPLORING THE DANGEROUS TRADES*.

One of the most readable autobiographies I have found is called *DR. NELLIE*. It is the engaging life story of a young woman who lived her early years in the East, spent some time on a pioneer farm in South Dakota and finally moved to California. She received her M.D degree in California at the age of 20 and practiced for many years in a small mining town. The book was first published in 1934 with the title, *A CHILD WENT FORTH*, and it was popular enough that it was also issued in a junior edition. Descriptions of Dr. Nellie's childhood are reminiscent in many ways of *Little House On The Prairie*. She describes so well how lives were often saved by the sheer effort of doctors who had very little to offer medically. I was able

to get a reissued copy for one of my granddaughters, who has enjoyed reading it. I suspect that Dr. Helen Macknight Doyle would be very surprised if she could know that her story is being read and talked about in 1995.

Dr. Lillian Welsh wrote reminiscences of her thirty years in Baltimore where she was closely associated with the opening of the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine. That school accepted women students from its very beginning because the many women who raised and gave money to help finance the school insisted on this. Dr. Welsh writes very honestly about herself and her associate, Dr. Mary Sherwood, in the following words:

" We were two ordinary women who had looked forward from early girlhood to the possibility of self support, who had gone into teaching because it was the only profession with any intellectual outlook which promised self-support and who had, following our intellectual bent, gone into medicine because we were interested in science and in human nature."

A much different story is told by Dr. Anne Walter Fearn, an intrepid, enterprising woman who spent forty years in China. While there she started a medical school for Chinese students at the missionary hospital where she worked. She delivered over 6000 babies during her stay

in China and in the book there are many pictures of Dr. Fearn's babies.

These stories, which were published mainly in the late 1800's and early 1900's, gave me a view of an earlier and often overlooked period in the history of medical education and practice in this country. Since embarking on my journey into these experiences of the real pioneers, I have continued to seek out autobiographies of women who graduated in this century and have also written about their lives. It has been interesting to see the changes in their opportunities and their choices. Women surgeons and psychiatrists seem most willing to write about themselves. There are also interesting stories of women who have gone to other countries, often as missionaries. Some women have also written novels.

I have been able to identify most easily with stories of women who graduated, as I did, in the middle of this century. Historian Regina Morantz interviewed many women physicians in the 1950's and published some of these oral histories under the title, *IN HER OWN WORD'S*. She divides these autobiographies into three groups, Harvest Time for women graduating in the early part of this century; Bearing Fruit, for women of my period; and Blossoming for those young women, like today's graduates.

whose careers began when the numbers of women in medical schools had increased dramatically. The excitement of being a pioneer is rare now, though, as there will always be new opportunities for both men and women in medicine, a different kind of excitement and satisfaction can be theirs.

What the reading of these autobiographies has done for me and what, I hope, my description of them will do for you is to give you a tremendous respect for the opportunities which we have as members of the healing profession, a great admiration for these medical pioneers, and pride in joining their ranks. Today I welcome all of you sons and daughters of Aesclepios as we look backward to learn from those who have gone before and journey forward together.

Earlier today I had the opportunity to share with the graduates and their families and friends the stories of some of the courageous pioneer women physicians who received their M.D. degrees before the turn of the century. In reading their autobiographies and learning about the challenges they encountered, I was perhaps most impressed with the way in which their lives were enriched by the opportunity to become official members of the medical profession, a privilege which had not been available to American women before 1849. It is the privilege which you have today. Not only were these women especially interested in providing good health care for women and children but they were committed to making it possible for other women to attend medical schools which offered quality education and adequate clinical experience. As a woman physician I feel special gratitude for this. In addition to this they were very supportive of each other and in most cases were active in their communities. Also they still found time to read literature, listen to music, write letters, keep journals and even go on picnics. The quality of their lives as told in their autobiographies was rich and varied. Ours can be the same.

I realize that life itself and certainly the practice of medicine is much more complicated today. I hope that you will find time in the years ahead not only to practice medicine competently and empathetically but to share

ideas, hopes and dreams with your families and friends, to show concern about your communities and to remember warmly your years here at UMKC as members of our medical school family. To paraphrase Rabindranath Tagore:

"May our teaching and guidance like sunlight surround you and give you illumined freedom".