

**AN EVENT OF IMPORTANCE
STORIES OF WOMEN PHYSICIANS**

Presented by

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AN EVENT OF IMPORTANCE

In 1850, no regularly established medical school anywhere in the world consistently opened its doors to women. This was the situation despite the fact that Geneva Medical College did open its doors temporarily to Elizabeth Blackwell in 1847. This event occurred because of the persistence of Blackwell in making an application for admission and an unexpected action on the part of the Dean, who was being pressured by Dr. Joseph Warrington from Philadelphia. Dr. Warrington had recommended Blackwell very highly and encouraged the school to admit her. The application to Geneva Medical College was one of her twenty six applications. The Dean left the decision to the student body and those young men, in a sporting mood, voted enthusiastically and unanimously to admit her. She received a letter of acceptance from the Dean with an enclosed letter from the class which she afterwards copied on parchment and esteemed ^{it} as one of her most valued possessions. She included this "unique and manly" letter in her autobiography. It reads as follows:

At a meeting of the entire medical class of Geneva Medical College, held this day, October 20, 1847, the following resolutions were unanimously adopted:--

1. Resolved—That one of the radical principles of a Republican Government is the universal education of both sexes; that to every branch of scientific education the door should be open equally to all; that the application of Elizabeth Blackwell to become a member of our class meets our entire approbation; and in extending our unanimous invitation we pledge ourselves that no conduct of ours shall cause her to regret her attendance at this institution.
2. Resolved—That a copy of these proceedings be signed by the chairman and transmitted to Elizabeth Blackwell.

And indeed she had no cause to regret her attendance at Geneva and was successful as a student. She graduated with an official M.D degree in 1849, the first woman in the world to do so. She scored highest in the school's final examinations and her graduation thesis was published, another first for a woman.

Slide I Geneva Medical College

Slide II Early Photo of Blackwell

Despite Blackwell's obvious success the editor of America's leading medical journal wrote in 1849:

Slide III Quote

“ It is much to be regretted that she has been led to aspire to honors and duties which by the order of nature and the common consent of the world devolve upon men.”

I have also brought with me a copy of a poem published in Punch. I'll read the introductory paragraph

The title of Blackwell's autobiography, which was not published until 1895, is PIONEER WORK IN OPENING THE MEDICAL PROFESSION TO WOMEN. And this is certainly what she had accomplished. Those of us in the medical profession should be forever grateful to this visionary and courageous woman, for she made it possible for other women to follow in her footsteps, not only in the United States and Europe but also in the world. She saw her own particular role as the guardian of the hopes of women who wished to become physicians.

I became very interested not only in Blackwell as a pioneer woman physician but also in the kind of medical education she received at Geneva Medical College and how her unusual resourcefulness and determination continued throughout her life. This led me on a fascinating journey through the United States and Europe as I explored her career and also those of other pioneer women who followed

in her footsteps so much of the way. One factor which seemed to make these footsteps possible was that these women were able to capitalize on the argument that women had a special vocation to serve women, children and the more unfortunate members of society.

Blackwell had prepared herself for medical school in the conventional way by “reading” medicine with several Quaker physicians who befriended and supported her. They not only recommended her for medical school but also encouraged her to seek practical experience at Philadelphia’s Blockley Almshouse between her first and second years of study. When she arrived there she was given a room in the women’s syphilitic department, which she described as the most unruly part of the institution. In her autobiography she related that the medical head of the hospital was most kind to her and that she had free entry into all of the women’s wards. The young resident physicians were, however, not friendly and actually ceased to write diagnoses and treatment plans for patients on the cards which were regularly placed at the head of all beds. As she was leaving Blockley she wrote “ that trying as it had been to body and mind, she was conscious of the great gain in medical knowledge and worldly experience which it had afforded.”

In most medical schools of that time there were only two terms of four to five months each and subjects covered

were anatomy, which required dissection, and didactic lectures in physiology, medical, obstetrical and surgical practice and materia medica. The second year was very much a repetition of the first. There was no clinical experience at most schools, certainly not at Geneva Medical College, and many students worked as apprentices or in hospitals to obtain this. Blackwell realized that she very much needed more clinical experience if she was going to be a practicing physician and no post-graduate hospital appointments were open to women in the United States.

However, she was fortunate to be able to pursue further training in Europe where she had some useful connections, particularly in England where she had been born. At that time doctors with official degrees were allowed to spend brief periods in advanced study in some countries. She was able to attend lectures in England but her goal was to affiliate with one of the large hospitals in Paris for bedside experience. Being denied a regular appointment of any kind she finally decided to enter the midwifery training program at La Maternite as an aide. While working there she was highly respected but, unfortunately, while caring for an infant with an eye disorder, she contracted the infection which resulted in blindness and eventual enucleation of her left eye. This greatly restricted further

educational opportunities abroad though the Paris medical community made some efforts to make amends.

She returned to the United States in 1851 and then began her struggle to establish a practice. She eventually accomplished this by giving public lectures on health related topics, which were attended mainly by women, and then opening her own dispensary in 1853. Since she did not have access to any hospital beds she obtained a charter for a hospital to care for the indigent sick and to offer training for women as physicians and ~~to~~ nurses. The New York Infirmary for Women and Children was officially opened in 1857. It was the first hospital run entirely by women.

Slide IV New York Infirmary

Fortunately during these years the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania had been established in 1850 with its first degrees granted in 1851.

Slide V Photographs of Female Medical College (2)

Also six women had received medical degrees from Cleveland Western Reserve Medical School.

Slide VI Emily Blackwell

Slide VII Marie Zakrzewska

Blackwell's sister, Emily, was one of the six and also Dr. Marie Zakrzewska, a former German midwife who had been supported by Blackwell in her efforts to become a physician. Both became stalwarts in the establishment of the New York Infirmary. Zakrzewska went on to establish the New England Hospital for Women and Children in Boston and it also became an important hospital for post-graduate training for women physicians and for nurses.

By 1859, just ten years after she had graduated, Blackwell estimated that 300 women had managed to graduate somewhere in medicine, many from sectarian schools and women's medical colleges. In addition to the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania three other women's medical colleges were opened by 1870, in Boston in 1850, at the New York Infirmary in 1868 and in Chicago in 1870. In 1870 the University of Michigan became the first prominent coeducational institution outside Europe to accept women medical students on a continuing basis.

Slide VIII Medical Education in Europe

Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell were the first American women to seek post-graduate study in Europe. Both had gone to Europe in the eighteen fifties when

women could not be admitted to university medical schools anywhere. However, after 1865 women were formally admitted to medical schools of the University of Zurich and the University of Paris. Because of the continued lack of opportunities for medical school and post graduate training in the United States many American women sought medical training in Europe. Seven women from four different countries—Russia, Great Britain, United States and Switzerland—pioneered in medical study at Zurich.

Slide IX Nadezhda Suslova

The first to get a degree was the Russian, Nadezhda Suslova, who was allowed to take the final examinations and to defend her thesis in 1867. Hers was the first medical degree awarded ^{in Europe} to a modern woman by a recognized university of high academic standards. Two British women were allowed to matriculate the year of her graduation and one of them, Frances Elizabeth Morgan, became the second woman to defend her thesis and receive her degree there. From then on Swiss universities welcomed thousands of female medical students from all over Europe and North America. They became havens for the Russian women where medical education for women was very limited and for many years not permitted at all. These universities required the equivalent of five years of university level

study unless students had had previous education or training. Real co-educational medical education was realized there for the first time.

Slide X Cartoon of Zurich

Slide XI Susan Dimrock

Susan Dimrock from the United States entered the University of Zurich in 1868 when she was 21 years old. She had read medicine with Dr. Zakrzewska and had worked in the New England Hospital for Women and Children as an intern. Dr. Zakrzewska had loaned her the money to study in Europe. She finished her course work and defended her thesis in three years.

Slide XII Mary Putman

Meanwhile Mary Putman (Jacobi), who had a New York pharmacy degree and a medical degree from the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania, was the first American to seek further training and a second medical degree at the University of Paris. She successfully defended her thesis, for which she received a bronze medal, and received her medical degree in 1871, the same year Susan Dimrock accomplished this feat in Zurich. In 1870

Putman wrote a letter to her mother from Paris expressing the following hopes:

Slide XIII Letter from Putman

1. To honestly earn a living
2. To pay my debts
3. To educate the younger children (11 siblings)
4. To buy you a silk dress
5. To accumulate a medical library and to secure its employment for all medical students, especially women
6. To have a fund by which I can pay for services of a reader during the last 10 years of my life, when I shall most probably be blind.

Dimrock and Putman were the first Americans to join a growing procession of young women from many countries who sought medical training in Europe to qualify themselves as thoroughly as men to practice medicine. They were followed by many others, the numbers being highest from countries that were slowest to give women equal treatment in medical education, Russia, Germany, Austria, Great Britain and even the United States. Both Dimrock and Putman returned to the United States to become important women physicians and teachers. It is

interesting that almost all of the European and American pioneers who studied abroad were to serve, whether by choice or necessity, in special clinics and hospitals created to meet the needs of women and children.

By 1880, 200⁰ American women had received medical degrees. Ten more women's medical colleges opened before 1900 and graduates of these schools were practicing in every state of the union before the dawn of the century. Blackwell and her associates had added a Women's Medical College to the New Work Infirmary in 1868 and she said it was mainly because of her dissatisfaction with the training most of the young women, who came to the Infirmary for post-graduate training, had received in medical school. She was determined to provide a graded curriculum with annual sessions of 6 to 8 months and a three year course of study. This school was probably the most closely watched of all women's medical schools, and in the first decade after its opening it graduated 53 women physicians. It closed in 1899 when Cornell declared its willingness to accept women. Blackwell had always favored coeducational training for all physicians.

Slide XIV Anatomy at the New York Infirmary School

Slide XV Photograph of Blackwell at the time

Of special interest to me is that there was a Women's Medical College in Topeka, Kansas at this time, which seems not to have been officially recognized, and that a Women's Medical College opened in Kansas City, Missouri in 1895.

Slide XVI Women's Medical College of Kansas City

There were no women on the faculty of the Kansas City school. One of its graduates was Mary Canaga Rowland who had gone two years to the Topeka Women's Medical College before moving on the Kansas City School. She graduated in 1901 but later sought a second degree at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska, where she was one of two women students. Her memoirs were written between 1930 and 1955 and were published in 1994 by a great-great nephew. They tell of her medical education and her practice as a frontier doctor in Herndon and Topeka, Kansas and eventually in Oregon. Her colorful stories of her experience with a wide variety of patients are fascinating and told with humility and humor. She delivered babies, cared for all kinds of injuries, saw patients with mental illnesses, witnessed suicides and incest and described all of these experiences with disarming frankness, including both her failures and successes.

Slide XVII Cover of Mary Canaga Rowland's book

The 1900's brought many changes in medical education and opportunities for both women and men in the United States; and as medical education improved, the flow of students to Europe declined. In 1910, the year both Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell died, there were over 7000 women physicians practicing in the United States. They could have remembered a time when there were none. It was much more recently that Blackwell was honored by the placement of her statue on the campus of Hobart and William Smith College, the scion of Geneva Medical College.

Slide XVIII Statue of Blackwell

Slide XIX Quote

In 1911 at a meeting of the New York Academy of Medicine, William A. Welch, Dean of Johns Hopkins Medical School, which had admitted women from the time of its establishment in 1893, said:

“The entrance of women into the profession of medicine is an event of importance—not only to the

medical profession, but to humanity and to society and it will always have a place in human history.”

But “human history” for women in medicine took a real downturn as the women’s medical colleges closed their doors and the number of women seeking medical degrees decreased rather precipitously. Attendance at women’s schools decreased from 541 in 1893 to 183 in 1904 despite the fact that the remaining women’s schools had received relatively high marks in the Flexner Report. The total enrollment of women in medical schools dropped from 1280 in 1902 to 526 in 1913. At that point the percentage of women among medical students was about 5% and it remained fairly constant for the next fifty years. There were 5 women in my entering class at Kansas University in the forties. The university’s first graduating class included two women who had been attending sectarian schools in Kansas City, three of which were combined to form the clinical department of the university’s School of medicine in Kansas City in 1905.

The upturn came with the women’s movement in the late 1960’s; and the numbers of women physicians increased not only in the United States, but in most of the countries of Europe, which had originally sent many of their women students to Switzerland or Paris for medical education.

It is important to remember that many of the early opportunities for women in medicine were available because of the establishment by women of hospitals and dispensaries which primarily served women and children and most often those from the lower socioeconomic strata of society. The hospitals were essential for the clinical training of women physicians, and also they provided areas where women could come together in care of the sick and support of each other. Established physicians were important role models for those just embarking on their medical careers.

Two women's medical schools in New York were attached to hospitals for women and children. The historic New York Infirmary for Women and Children, which was opened by Blackwell in 1857 is an important historic landmark. Marie Zakrzewska and her supporters in Boston opened the New England Hospital for Women and Children in 1862. She was aided in this endeavor by Lucy Sewall, who had been one her students, and also by Lucy's father, a prominent leader in Boston. Susan Dimrock returned for her study abroad to join these two courageous women and the three are often pictured together as the founders of this famous institution.

Slide XX Three founders

Slides XXI New England Hospital (4 Slides)

In a large part to provide clinical experience for women medical students of the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania, a group of Quaker women led by Ann Preston from the college founded the Women's Hospital of Philadelphia in 1861. Two large row houses were purchased and the hospital rented space to the college for classrooms. The purposes of the hospital were stated to be:

“to establish in the city of Philadelphia a hospital for the treatment of diseases of women, children and for obstetrical cases; furnishing at the same time facilities for clinical instruction to women engaged in the study of medicine and for the practical training of nurses; the chief resident physician to be a woman.”

The first chief resident physician was Emeline Horton Cleveland, a graduate of the Female Medical College who had been sent to Paris for post graduate training. She became one of the first women surgeons in the United States to perform major gynecologic surgery.

Slide XXII Mary Harris Thompson

Mary Harris Thompson, who had been an intern at the New York Infirmary went to Chicago where she got further medical training at Northwestern University before the school discontinued offering that opportunity to women. Within seven years of her arrival in Chicago she opened a medical and surgical practice and launched the Chicago Hospital for Women and Children. In 1870 the Women's Hospital Medical College of Chicago was established in association with the hospital. It was the only regular women's medical college west of the Appalachians and eventually merged with Northwestern University twenty years later. The hospital still remains open but it was renamed the Mary Thompson Hospital in honor of its founder.

A more recent story of the establishment by women of a hospital for children is that of the Children's Mercy Hospital of Kansas City now an important research and referral center for much of the midwest.

Slide XXIII Katherine Richardson

Katherine Berry Richardson, a graduate of the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania, came to Kansas City with her dentist sister, Dr. Alice Berry Graham, in 1893 and they set up offices together. Dr. Graham immediately set about to raise money for a "Free

Bed Association for Crippled, Ruptured and Deformed Children". With money from the fund the sisters hospitalized their first crippled child in the Women and Children's Hospital, a very small ill-equipped institution staffed by women physicians. Dr. Katherine later operated on the child's hip in that hospital.

Slide XXIV First Mercy Bed

When that hospital closed the sisters went on to establish Mercy Hospital: The Hospital for the Free Bed Foundation Association in a house that they rented. Dr. Katherine had been admitted to membership in the Jackson County Medical Society in 1895. Eventually in 1917 the hospital was moved to a much larger, better equipped institution called Children's Mercy Hospital. The founding date remains 1897 when the first child was rescued and treated by the sisters.

Slide XXV First Children's Mercy Hospital

Dr. Katherine is known as the Lady of Mercy and she dominated the institution for almost 30 years. She was a very successful facial surgeon, having trained herself in the repair of cleft palates and harelips. She eventually was awarded Fellowship in the American College of surgeons, a

rare accomplishment for a women physician at that time. She never accepted a penny of salary from the hospital, although she spent four-fifths of her time there. She died in 1933, just a few days after operating on a child with a harelip at the hospital. One of the few things which she left in writing is:

“Our work, yours and mine is to hold Mercy Hospital to its very best while we live—to keep fully up with all that’s decent—to somehow, some way get a research laboratory for children’s diseases--to work as though we are going to stay here forever—and to realize that what is best will live on in the hearts of others, and that only so shall we be monumented.”

The Hospital was moved to its present location in 1970 and has expanded extensively. It now has many research laboratories studying children’s diseases and is one of the teaching hospitals of the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Medicine.

Not only are these stories fascinating and inspiring but they certainly fill me with awe at the resourcefulness and determination of these pioneers to offer care to those in need, but especially to women and children. As Rosalie Morton, a 1897 graduate of Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania, put it, “each of us wanted to be worthy of

following in the footsteps of (the) pioneers; each of us hoped that we, too, might be able to advance the position of women in medicine in our own day.” Learning more about them from their own autobiographical writing and from the records of historians has been an enriching experience for me. In sharing some of these stories with you I hope you will be inspired to seek out more about the many women who have paved the way after Elizabeth Blackwell opened the medical profession to us, indeed an Event of Importance.

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