

Elizabeth Blackwell: a pioneer female medical graduate

This year marks the centenary of the death of Dr Elizabeth Blackwell, who died on 31 May 1910, the first woman in the English-speaking world to qualify as a doctor. She practiced both in England and the USA and did much to encourage, in the face of great opposition, medical training for women in both countries.

Elizabeth Blackwell was born in Bristol in 1821, one of nine children. Her father, a Quaker, was a prosperous sugar refiner, but when he lost his factory in a fire in 1832, he emigrated with his family, first to New York, and eventually settled in Cincinnati. Elizabeth was determined to practice medicine, in those days unheard of for a woman. She moved to North Carolina at the age of 24 years to live with a Dr John Dickson, studying medicine from his text books, then moved to work under his brother, a GP in Charleston, South Carolina.

After applying to no less than 29 medical schools, starting with the famous ones and working down the scale, Blackwell was finally accepted at a small school, Geneva Medical College, in New York State, which ran a 2-year course. The story goes that the college faculty put her proposed application to the student body who, believing it to be a hoax, voted for acceptance. Be that as it may, she graduated MD in 1848 and was placed top of her year. Unable to obtain an appointment in the United States, Blackwell enlisted at La Maternité Hospital in Paris to study midwifery. Sadly, she developed purulent ophthalmia from a baby she was treating, had to have the eye enucleated, and as a consequence decided that her original plan to train as a surgeon would have to be abandoned.

In 1850 she came to London, studied under Sir James Paget, surgeon at St

Bartholomew's, and became friendly with Florence Nightingale, who had her stay with her. Some years later, Miss Nightingale had discussions with Dr Blackwell with view to her becoming superintendent of the proposed new School of Nursing, but the idea fell through when it became obvious that this post would not give Dr Blackwell the possibility of continuing in active medical practice.

In London, Blackwell also met Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, who she greatly encouraged to battle her way into medical training. Indeed, Garrett Anderson was the first woman both to train and to qualify as a doctor in the UK obtaining, after a tremendous legal battle, her Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries, the LSA, in 1865. (The Society of Apothecaries rapidly

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altered its regulations in 1868, closing its examinations to all but those students enrolled at recognized medical schools, to which, of course, women were barred from entry.)

Returning to New York in 1857, and being refused appointments in the city's hospitals, Blackwell established the New York Infirmary for Indigent Women and Children, adding to its medical staff her sister Emily, who had now also qualified in medicine, and Maria Zackrzewska, a Polish immigrant, who had succeeded in graduating in medicine in Cleveland, Ohio. They worked among the most destitute, often immigrant, families of the metropolis. In 1858 the Medical Act was passed in the UK, which recognized for registration doctors with foreign degrees obtained before that year. Hearing of this, Elizabeth left her sister in charge of the Infirmary, returned to London and, in the following

January, had her name entered onto the register of the General Medical Council – the first woman to do so. The General Medical Council soon plugged this loophole in its regulations.

With the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861 Blackwell, now once again back in New York, established the Womens' Central Association for Relief, which carried out the vital task of training large numbers of women as nurses who were needed to deal with the massive numbers of battle-field casualties. At the end of the war, the two sisters opened the Women's Medical College of New York, with Elizabeth responsible for the course in hygiene.

In 1869, Blackwell left her sister in charge of the College and returned once more to London, to teach gynaecology at the newly opened London School of Medicine for Women, later to become the Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine. This was founded by another redoubtable pioneer female doctor, Sophia Jex-Blake. The teaching staff was joined by Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, who also served on the School council and was Dean from 1883 to 1902 – they must have been a formidable team!

Originally, the students could only use the clinical facilities at the New Hospital for Women, which had been founded by Garrett Anderson (named, after her death, the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Hospital). However, in 1877 the Royal Free Hospital allowed clinical facilities to the students, and other hospitals soon followed this lead. In 1907, Dr Blackwell was injured in a fall and never really recovered from her injury. She died of a stroke at her home in Hastings on 31 May 1910, aged 89 years. She was buried in the churchyard at Kilmun, on Holy Loch, Scotland – a truly remarkable woman. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

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