

# Sophia Jex-Blake: the first woman medical graduate to practise in the UK

This year marks the centenary of the death of Dr Sophia Jex-Blake, one of the handful of women who, in the face of enormous professional opposition and of legal difficulties, established the right of women both to train in and to practise medicine in this country.

Sophia was born in 1840 in Hastings, Sussex. Her father was an eminent lawyer and her brother became headmaster of Rugby School. She attended several private boarding schools and, although she knew that there was no need for her to earn a living, planned to become a school teacher. At the age of 17 years, she entered the Queen's College, in Harley Street, London, a teacher's training school for women which still flourishes. In 1862, Sophia spent several months in Edinburgh, where she had private tuition. Here she befriended Elizabeth Garrett (who became Elizabeth Garrett Anderson after her marriage) who, at the time, was preparing her application for enrolment as a medical student in Edinburgh.

Here we should recall that in 1858 the Medical Act established a register to list the names of qualified medical practitioners. Elizabeth Blackwell, herself a native of Bristol, who was the first woman to qualify in medicine in the USA (at Geneva College, in New York State), and who had made a short working visit to the UK, was the only woman to appear on the register. In 1865, Elizabeth Garrett passed the examination conducted by the Society of Apothecaries in London and became the second woman to get onto the register. Increasing male opposition made the Society of Apothecaries take steps to prevent further women from obtaining registration by making certain compulsory courses in the medical syllabus closed to women.

In 1869, Miss Jex-Blake and four other women matriculated at the University of

Edinburgh and became the first five women to become medical students at a British university. At the end of the first year, two more women joined the group, which became known as the 'Edinburgh seven'. When the seven applied to attend the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary to undertake their clinical training, this was refused by the authorities on the grounds that this would lower the standing of the profession. Among the opponents to the application was the Professor of Medicine, Robert Christison, who believed that women would lower the reputation of both the school and the profession. Surprisingly, another opponent was Joseph Lister, who had recently arrived from Glasgow as Professor of Surgery.

A long and frustrating legal battle went through the courts until, in 1873, a final decision, made by a panel of no less than 12 judges, concluded that the university had not been empowered to accept female medical students in the first place.

The following year, 1874, the Edinburgh female students moved to London. Jex-Blake initiated the founding of The London School of Medicine for Women, in Henrietta Street, Brunswick Square. Elizabeth Garrett Anderson became the first Dean, and a number of eminent (male) doctors formed a panel of lecturers. Jex-Blake acted as school secretary, as well as one of its first 14 students, the Edinburgh seven having been joined by a further seven women.

Two problems faced the new school. First it needed affiliation to a major hospital for teaching and, second, students required access to recognized examinations for General Medical Council recognition. In 1876, the College of Physicians in Dublin was the first to agree to admit women to its examinations and in 1877 the London (later Royal) Free Hospital in Gray's Inn Road became affiliated for teaching women medical students. That year, 1877, Jex-Blake gained both the MD in Berne, Switzerland and passed the

Dublin examination. She was duly registered in that May.

The following year, Dr Jex-Blake opened a medical practice in Edinburgh and established a dispensary (outpatient clinic) for impoverished women. Sadly, the death of her mother in 1881 led to her suffering clinical depression and precipitated closure of the practice. Fortunately, after a couple of years, she recovered her health, reopened her practice, moved to larger premises and opened a ward for inpatients, which was named the Edinburgh Hospital for Women.

In 1885 victory came at last; The Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons of Edinburgh established a conjoint board, with power to award diplomas in medicine and surgery. Women were to be accepted into the examinations.

In 1887, at mostly her own expense, Jex-Blake founded the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women, in Singleton Square. However, things did not go smoothly in the new medical school; in only its second year, disputes broke out between numbers of the students and Jex-Blake because there was resentment at the strict rules of conduct which she imposed. A break-away school, the Medical College for Women, opened and Jex-Blake's school eventually closed in 1898. However, until her retirement from practice, in 1899, her hospital prospered; after her retirement it was renamed The Bruntsfield Hospital. Sophia spent her remaining years on a small farm in Sussex, enjoying gardening, reading and meeting her friends. She died of heart failure on 7 January 1912.

Sophia Jex-Blake may have been a tough, imperious character, and the possessor of a hasty temper, but these were traits that were probably needed in her long battles with the establishment. No one, however, could deny her dedication, determination and honesty. There is a fine portrait of her in the Royal Society of Medicine. [BJHM](#)

*Conflict of interest: none.*

**Professor Harold Ellis** is Emeritus Professor of Surgery, Guy's, King's and St Thomas' School of Biomedical Sciences, London SE1 1UL