

History of Medicine

Women in Medicine : The path was never easy

For a long time, women were denied entry into medical schools all over the world. While this was true for all branches of education, for medical science, the professional environment was particularly hostile towards women. The pioneering psychiatrist of England in the nineteenth century, Henry Maudsley, even commented that too much education, especially in medical science, may cause menstrual irregularity and sterility in girls!! This short article will narrate the resistance faced by some of the early female doctors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In Britain, Elizabeth Garrett Anderson was the first woman qualified to add her name to the medical register in 1866. She obtained her Society of Apothecaries licence in 1865 and joined the medical register a year later. She had to take this circuitous route as no medical school at that time allowed female students. Elizabeth had at first enrolled as a nurse in Middlesex hospital and started attending classes for male doctors. But when those students complained, she was barred from attending the classes. So, she applied to the society of Apothecaries and was able to study there. But after her graduation, even the Society of Apothecaries changed its rules to prevent future female students. She was able to join the British Medical Association in 1873 and for 19 years, remained the sole female member.

In 1875, Mrs Anderson was scheduled to read a paper on Obstetrics at the annual conference of the BMA in Edinburgh. At the last moment, the organizers became aware that the speaker was a woman and they tried to protest and block her from the presentation. However, she was able to speak nonetheless. However, after this event, the other members of the BMA added a clause to the articles so that no other woman would be able to get membership of the association. This prohibition was lifted only in 1892.

In 1866, Garrett also opened the St. Mary's Dispensary for Women in London. For a long time, she was the only physician there as male physicians of the time did not want to work with a woman. So she remained the physician, surgeon, pharmacist, midwife and clerk of that hospital and also did home visits. In 1870, she passed her MD from the University of Paris (as British schools did not have provisions to admit female students). She travelled from London to Paris repeatedly and successfully passed all parts of the examination. Her thesis was on migraine. But the British Medical register did not recognise her degree at that time.

In 1878, Dr Anderson performed the first ovariectomy as a woman surgeon. But the operation could not be performed in a hospital as it was considered a risky procedure and death of the patient would risk the reputation of the hospital. So she had to rent a private house, get the rooms cleaned and bring in the nurses.

Dr Anderson also helped found the London School of Medicine

for Women in 1874. She taught there for 23 years and later became the dean. However, the founding of this medical school required the determination of another woman, Sophia Jex-Blake, whom we will describe next.

For Sophia Jex-Blake, the path was even more difficult. She was born in a conservative family in Sussex. However, it was her trip to America that influenced her profoundly and inspired her to take up medicine as a career. She was admitted to Women's

Medical College of the New York Infirmary in 1868. But the next year, her father died and she had to return to England.

In 1869, Jex-Blake was admitted to the Edinburgh University medical school but the university later overturned the decision and decided not to allow females to study. But Jex-Blake was not someone to give up easily. She campaigned hard and in 1870, she and four other female students were readmitted. But they had to attend separate classrooms and pay higher tuition fees. But pressure was mounted by the opponents of female education and the University soon stopped the separate classes and ordered the female students to seek tuition at the nearby Royal Infirmary. Some faculty member at Edinburgh commented that ".....women didn't understand their position, that they did their own work in the world badly, that they had not sufficient strength for medical practice." The hospital refused to teach female students.

On 18th November 1870, a memorable incident took place, known as "Surgeon's Hall Riot". The female medical students at the University of Edinburgh were to attend an anatomy examination at the Surgeon's Hall. As they were about to enter, they were blocked by a large group of male students and other hoodlums. They were verbally abused, refused and mud was pelted on them and the gate was closed. They were finally able to enter but the problems were far from over. During the examination, a live sheep was released into



Kadambini Ganguly

— the first female in India to get a degree in Western Medicine in India

the examination hall to disrupt the process. By the time the examination ended, the female students were all covered in mud. This was not an isolated incident but the culmination of months of bullying, threatening mails and negative social environment. Even when the sheep was pushed inside the examination hall, one of the professors is said to have remarked “The sheep can stay, it is clearly more intelligent than those out there.”

However, media coverage of this riot helped create groundswell support for the women. A General Committee for Securing a Complete Medical Education for Women was formed, Charles Darwin being one of the members. This group tried to garner support in favour of female medical education.

Finally these medical students were refused graduation by the university in 1873. They appealed in court, but failed. In desperation, Jex-Blake opened the London school of medicine for Women.

But the battle was not over. This new London school could teach female students but they were not authorized to give degrees. For that they needed approval of a university. But all the British universities declined to allow female medical students to sit for final exams. Finally, in 1876, the UK Medical Act was passed which allowed female students to be licenced as doctors. The College of physicians of Ireland was the first to implement this new rule and Jex-Blake was finally able to sit her final exam in Dublin to get the degree. She also obtained an MD from Berne. But it was still difficult for her to get accepted in the medical world. For example, when she wrote an article for the *Lancet*, she received the reply that the journal “...could not stoop to record medical experiences, however interesting, if they occurred in the practice of the inferior sex.”

Just to mention here, Jex-Blake was a trailblazer in more ways than one. She had to struggle for her degree and also struggle for her personal life. In a time when homosexuality was seen as unnatural in the UK, she maintained a lifelong romantic relation with Dr Margaret Todd. This must have also created hardships for her.

There were altogether seven women in this saga, known as “Edinburgh seven”. One of them, Dr Edith Pechey, moved to the then British colony of India. In Mumbai she became medical officer of the Cama Women and Children’s hospital. Among other pioneering works she did, was sponsoring one of the first female doctors of India, Rukmabai.

We will end this article with the story of two Indian female doctors. In 1889, Rukmabai went to England, helped by Dr Pechey and Eva McLaren, to study medicine at London school of medicine for Women. But before going to England, she was already famous for a different reason. Rukmabai was married off at the age of eleven, as was the norm then in India. She lived with her parents for education. Later, when her husband asked her to go and live with him, she declined. She said that she had been married in her childhood without consent and she did not want to continue the marriage. There was a memorable court case. Rukmabai lost the case and was ordered to live with her husband or face imprisonment. She refused to go to her

husband. Finally, she appealed to Queen Victoria, who overruled the court verdict and annulled the marriage. This case paved the way for age of consent in marriage in British India.

Rukmabai went to England. She successfully completed her degree and came back to practice in India. She mainly worked in Surat. She was the second woman after Bengal’s Kadambini Ganguly, to practice medicine in India.

Kadambini Ganguly (1861-1923) was the first female in India to get a degree in Western Medicine in India. She did not stop there and travelled to Europe to get additional qualifications from Edinburgh, Dublin and Glasgow. She came back to India and started her private practice. There were many men who opposed her work and in one prominent Bengali magazine, her moral character was also questioned. Also one prominent Bengali magazine (so called symbol of Bengali enlightenment) tried to start a campaign against her that she was unqualified. But facing male opposition was nothing new to her. Many male teachers at the Calcutta Medical College were against her education and it is said that one teacher deliberately failed her by one mark in one subject in the final examination. But these incidents did not stop her. She managed a household of eight children, did a successful private practice and also was active in contemporary politics.

These anecdotes make it clear that the first women in medicine, the trailblazers, had to endure a lot of obstacles to get their foothold in the medical world. Their struggles made it easier for later women to excel in medicine and overcome gender inequality. Occurring in nineteenth century England, these anecdotes are all the more surprising as a woman, Queen Victoria, was at the helm of power in that country. This article is not exhaustive. There are many other stories to be told. But the author wishes to reserve them for a future publication if he gets the opportunity.

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