Miss Elizabeth Blackwell, M.D.

Background

The history of women in medicine is somewhat obscure. A third-century A.D. story written by a Latin author named Hyginus relates the account of a successful female physician who gained medical training by disguising herself as a man. In response to her phenomenal professional success, Athenian laws banning females from practicing medicine were said to have been lifted. Although the historical accuracy of the Hyginus story has been disputed, it is widely accepted that untrained women played a significant role in midwifery prior to the fifth century A.D., when educated male physicians began to take over their obstetric duties.

In more recent times, women were relegated to the sidelines of medicine, where they were expected to serve as nurses and assistants. In colonial America, for example, women were thought too modest and prudish to work in surgery or any aspect of medicine that exposed body parts. Colonial women were expected to cover most of their own skin in public and to refrain from any physical activity that might draw attention to their bodies. If they showed an interest in the health of other bodies beyond an empathetic desire to comfort a person in pain, females in early America were considered uncouth.

Elizabeth Blackwell knew the mind-set of her contemporaries had changed very little since those colonial days when she applied to American medical schools in the mid-1800s. Perhaps that is why she had the persistence to try 17 institutions before being accepted into New York's Geneva Medical College.

Since Dr. Blackwell's day, women physicians have become widely accepted and highly respected. In 1991 women comprised 36% of all medical school students in the United States. Over 20 percent of the professors at those schools were women. Nearly 20 percent of all medical doctors in the nation that year were female.

In this lesson students read about the challenges that faced the woman who paved the way for female doctors today—this nation's first female to earn a medical degree.

Teaching Activities

Doctor Blackwell's Day: Students put the medical practice of Dr. Blackwell into perspective as they research the state of medicine in the 1800s.
Women at Work: Students study statistics of women working in male-dominated fields today.

Extensions

1. Assign reports and/or time lines on the history of medicine from ancient times to the present.
2. Research the life of Emily Blackwell, Elizabeth's sister, who followed her into the medical profession.
3. Visit a hospital or invite guest speakers from the medical field to impress upon your students the multitude of diverse jobs available in medicine today.
4. Assign reports on "female firsts" in other fields including the first women in politics, the first women in aerospace, and the first women in business.
5. Assign reports on specific health issues including various diseases, diagnostic tools, medicines, and nutritional and health issues.

Miss Elizabeth Blackwell, M.D.

Elizabeth Blackwell was the first daughter—and the third child—born to a Bristol, England, couple who produced nine children. Samuel and Hannah Blackwell were intelligent, open-minded parents who insisted slavery was wrong, all people were created equal, and boys and girls should receive identical educations. Their liberal belief system shielded the senior Blackwells from social success, but it instilled in their children a determination to accomplish their goals regardless of obstacles or contemporary prejudices. In an age when most women were not employed outside the home and most men married women who supported their husband's interests rather than pursuing interests of their own, five Blackwell daughters grew up to have careers, and one Blackwell son married a women's rights activist who kept her own last name.

Elizabeth Blackwell grew up to become the first female medical doctor in America. More than once, she must have questioned her decision in the face of the nearly unilateral opposition she encountered, but she persevered.

Miss Blackwell set out on her path toward a medical career in 1847. Fifteen years earlier, at the age of 11, she had moved with her family to the United States after a fire destroyed her father's sugar refinery in England. Samuel Blackwell experienced little success in America, where his abolitionist views made him unpopular with other sugar producers who relied on the skills of slave labor. By the time Mr. Blackwell died in 1837, his family was nearly destitute. Elizabeth and her mother and two of her sisters opened a school to support their family. Elizabeth felt unfulfilled in her teaching position. She wanted to practice medicine.

Miss Blackwell applied to 17 medical schools before being admitted to Geneva Medical College in 1847. Administrators at institutions throughout the United States told Elizabeth she was not suited for the work of a doctor. Females were delicate and modest. They had no place in a career that focused on ailments of the vulgar human body. Even Geneva accepted Miss Blackwell's application on a fluke. The college dean, who did not want to take full responsibility for denying Elizabeth's application, put the matter to a vote of the student body. The all-male student body of the medical institution was convinced the whole matter was a hoax concocted by a rival school. In response to what they believed to be a joke, the young men voted to admit a woman to their campus. Geneva's dean abided by their vote.

Miss Blackwell's initial reception into Geneva Medical College was not a warm one, but she gained the respect of her school's students and faculty members by 1849 when she graduated at the top of her class. Upon graduation, Elizabeth Blackwell traveled to Europe to complete an internship. While there, she encountered misfortune. The young intern contracted ophthalmia while cleaning the infected eye of a patient. The infection left Blackwell blind in one eye and incapable of specializing in surgery as was her dream.

Dr. Blackwell returned to New York in 1851 ready to practice medicine in the capacity of general practitioner, but New York was not ready for her. Landlords were not willing to rent office space to a female doctor. Hospitals and clinics were not interested in hiring a female doctor. Patients were not anxious to call on a female doctor. So, Dr. Blackwell filled her time preparing a lecture series on the importance of good hygiene and physical education for women. Much to her surprise, the church basement, which she rented as a lecture hall, was filled to capacity on the evenings of her presentations. Dr. Blackwell's lectures won the respect and support of the Society of Friends, a Quaker organization.

The Society of Friends helped Dr. Blackwell locate office space. Quakers called on Dr. Blackwell and encouraged their neighbors to do the same. Elizabeth Blackwell's business grew. In time, she was able to open a hospital for the poor called the New York Infirmary for Women and Children. Later she was able to raise the funds to add on the Women's Medical College of the New York Infirmary.

Several years later Dr. Blackwell returned to England and became the first female physician ever placed on the Medical Register of the United Kingdom. In 1871 she helped establish England's National Health Society. In 1875 she accepted a position teaching gynecology at the London School of Medicine.

Such great successes notwithstanding, Dr. Blackwell's professional life was never an easy one. Newspaper articles and strangers' comments suggested that she was vulgar and uncouth for choosing the medical profession. Hate mail criticized and threatened Dr. Blackwell's practice. When a patient with appendicitis died in Dr. Blackwell's office, it took the words of a coroner, who indicated the patient had no chance of survival, to calm an angry mob that had gathered on Dr. Blackwell's lawn to condemn the female doctor as a murderer. Through it all Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, daughter of the enlightened Samuel and Hannah Blackwell, stood her ground. Female physicians today can thank her for doing so. In 1849 only one woman in the entire nation received a medical degree. Today about 36% of all U.S. medical students are women. In a myriad of medical specialty areas, women physicians are employed, accepted, and respected.

Name _____

Doctor Blackwell's Day

Choose one of the following medical events or conditions listed below to research and report about to your classmates so that everyone can get an idea of the state of medicine during the era in which Dr. Blackwell practiced.

1. Nineteenth-century advancements in diagnostic procedures and instrumentation including the 1819 invention of the stethoscope and the 1896 accidental discovery of X rays led to the first-time identification of several diseases that are readily diagnosed today. Write one to two paragraphs on each of the following diseases first identified in the nineteenth century: Hodgkin's disease, Addison's disease, Parkinson's disease. Report your findings.

2. The nineteenth century gave rise to the first medical scientists to systematically study healthy and diseased human tissue under a microscope. Write a brief definitive description of histology. Report your findings.

3. Plant-breeding experiments conducted by Gregor Mendel from 1856 through 1863 stimulated the study of human genetics for the first time. Write a brief summary of the history of genetics. Report your findings.

4. Several discoveries during the nineteenth century led to the development of germ theory. Obstetrician Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis showed that unwashed hands transmitted infections to maternity patients. Joseph Lister proved bacteria were airborne. Write one paragraph about the discoveries that developed the germ theory, one paragraph defining the germ theory, and one paragraph describing the results of the development of the germ theory including the introduction of antiseptics to surgical work. Report your findings.

5. Anesthetics were first employed in the nineteenth century. Research and write about the conditions of surgery prior to the use of anesthetics. Report your findings.

6. The mosquito was first implicated in the transmission of malaria and yellow fever. Write one or two paragraphs describing each of the diseases. Report your findings.

7. The mid-nineteenth-century work of Matthias Jakob Schleiden and Theodor Schwann first proved that all plants and animals are made up of cells, and that cell division develops tissues and organs. Write a brief summary of cell division. Report your findings.

Name _____

Women at Work

Statistics can often prove either side of an argument depending on how they are presented and interpreted. Use the following statistics reported in the mid-1990s and/or other contemporary statistics you locate on the Internet or in the news media to write a one-page persuasive essay. In your essay convince readers that women either have or have not made significant advancements in the world of work since the era of Elizabeth Blackwell.

Sixteen percent of scientists in the world today are women.

Six percent of engineers in the world today are women.

Women comprise 49% of all professionals.

Women comprise just over half the population, about 45% of employed workers in the United States, and about 30% of employed computer scientists.

Women comprise 7.8% of the professors in computer science and engineering schools. Eighty-four percent of Fortune 500 companies have at least one woman on their boards of directors.

Thirty-three percent of the middle and high school students enrolled in computer classes are girls.

Twenty-five percent of the people working in the field of law are women.

About 7,600,000 men are employed in construction in the United States while 784,000 women are employed in the same field.

Eighty-four percent of the medical doctors in the United States are men. Ninety-seven percent of nurses in the nation are women.

Thirty-six percent of the students enrolled in medical schools in the United States are women.

Fifty-five percent of working women provide half or more of their households' total income.

Seventy-one percent of single mothers are employed outside of the home.

Seven percent of all families in the nation are comprised of a stay-at-home mother, a working father, and one or more natural children.

Women constituted 6.5% of the faculty in computer science and computer engineering departments.