

HISTORY OF WOMEN IN SURGERY : AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The history of women as medical and surgical practitioners stretches back to atleast 3500 B.C. Wall painting in tombs and temples of ancient Egypt show them performing surgical procedures and there is also evidence that women surgeons were practicing in ancient Sumeria, Babylon, Greece and Rome.

During the middle ages as per a formal decree issued by the church in the twelfth century monks were prohibited from "blood-letting" or performing operations. This effectively relegated wound treatment, bleeding and bone-setting to barbers and women. Women were particularly valued for their skill in obstetrics and midwifery. In this way an overview with regard to the history of women in surgery is presented here in chronological order.

Sushruta (400 A.D.) of Ancient Indian Ayurvedic ("Science of Life") System of Medicine is universally known as the "Father of Surgery". "Susruta Samhita" - a comprehensive treatise on various aspects of surgery (between 800 B.C. to 1000 A.D.) contains 186 chapters in section with description of about 1,000 surgical instruments of various types¹⁻². Surgery was an integral part of Ayurvedic system, but by the middle of the first millennium B.C. the practice of surgery was abandoned by the doctors of the higher priest class because of religious taboos and dogma; it was relegated to the artisan classes of lower social caste, thus divaricating from the theoretical and scientific knowledge of the learned doctors.³ In the West, Ambrose Pare (1510 - 1590) of France is known as the "Father of Modern Surgery" as we understand today. Surgical contribution of Ancient Chinese Medicine is also of great importance.

The history of women as medical and

surgical practitioners stretches back to at least 3500 B.C. Wall paintings in tombs and temples of ancient Egypt show them performing surgical procedures, such as Caesarean section and the removal of cancerous breasts, and there is also evidence that women surgeons were practising in ancient Sumeria, Babylon, Greece and Rome. A Roman medical encyclopaedist, Aulus Cornelius Celsus, around 40 A.D., a notable medical writer of the first century A.D. tells of women physicians in Rome; later, Galen (c. A.D. 131-201) recounts the activities of several women, including Margareta, an army surgeon.

During the Middle Ages, much of the medical care was carried out by members of religious orders, but a formal decree issued by the church in the twelfth century prohibited monks from "blood-letting" or performing operations. This effectively relegated wound treatment, bleeding and bone-setting (the menial tasks) to barbers and

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women. In spite of this and the difficulties which women faced in attempting to obtain a formal education, they continued to practise surgery, often in secret, and were particularly valued for their skill in obstetrics and midwifery. In the fifteenth century laws were passed in France to control the practice of surgery, which resulted in further restrictions on women surgeons, although it was permissible in law for women to inherit and continue their husband's surgical practice.

In the kingdom of Naples, Italy, between 1273 - 1410 A.D., at least 23 women were licensed by the authorities to practise surgery in their region; a few female surgeons are known from other parts of Europe, where they learned their craft as apprentices to a father or husband, taking over from them when they died ⁴.

The early sixteenth century saw the formation of surgeon's guilds in England, which limited the activities of women still more, although some continued to provide medical treatment for the community. Many of these women were of good social standing and well educated, with a strong sense of public duty. The care of the sick poor was considered to be one of the duties of a "person of quality", a tradition which continued throughout Tudor (1485 - 1603) and Stuart (1371 - 1688) times. Women who practised surgery still had to face the hostility of their male counterparts, however, and allegations of witchcraft and sorcery were commonplace, although there were some notable exceptions to the prevailing male prejudices. John Aubrey ⁵ in his "Brief Lives" tells of a "rare shee surgeon," Mrs. Holder, who treated Charles II for a hand injury. Under her care, the hand was completely healed "to the great griefs of all the Surgeons, who envy and hate her."

During the eighteenth century the status of the women surgeon declined, as apothecaries; the vast majority of them men,

assumed responsibility for the general medical attention which was increasingly demanded by the public. It was not until the nineteenth century that women began to return to the medical profession, but even at this time it was virtually impossible for them to acquire any medical training. There was still prejudice to be overcome, and a few women even went to the extraordinary lengths of pretending to be men, the most famous example being Dr. James Barry (b. 1797), a British army surgeon. Although of small stature and with rather feminine features, she enjoyed a high reputation for many years as a skilful operator, serving at the Battle of Waterloo (1815) and in the Crimean wars (1854 - 1856). The deception was remarkably successful Florence Nightingale in a letter to her sister ⁶ described her as "the most hardened creature I ever met" - and her identity was only revealed when she died during an epidemic in 1865. The War Department and the medical establishment were so embarrassed by the discovery that the findings were hidden and Dr. Barry was officially buried as a man.

Unlike Barry, Elizabeth Blackwell (1821 - 1910), an English woman, refused to accept the advice of her tutor to don male clothing in order to obtain a medical qualification: "It was to my mind a moral crusade on which I had entered, a course of justice and common sense" ⁷. And, indeed, after entering the Geneva College of Medicine in New York, she gained her M.D. in 1849. This paved the way for many more American women to gain admittance to medical schools there, some of which, like the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania, were founded specifically for women.

Meanwhile, the situation in England was not so easy and, when Blackwell visited London in the 1850's she found that there was still tremendous opposition to the idea of medical training for women. Her courage

and tenacity had, however, inspired a whole generation of women, who began to demand access to the mind of medical education enjoyed for so long by men. One of these women, Elizabeth Garrett (1836 - 1917) had heard Blackwell lecture in London in 1859, and this had influenced her decision to pursue a career in medicine. In spite of hostility, both from her mother and the medical establishment, she became a Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries in 1865, after her father threatened the Society with a lawsuit if it refused to examine her. She thus became the first woman L.S.A. entered on the Medical Register. The first modern woman doctor in India was Kadambini Ganguly (M.B.B.S., 1880) trained at the Medical College, Calcutta (Established 1835 - this author's Alma Mater, as well). She later on continued her further medical education in Edinburgh and practised obstetric and gynaecological surgery in Calcutta ².

Following this landmark victory for women, the Society of Apothecaries, and later the British Medical Association, re-wrote their regulations in an attempt to bar any further female examination candidates. But pressure for reform was now coming from many areas. One notable campaigner was Sophia Lolita Jex-Blake (1840 - 1912) whose struggles were of great value in forming and influencing public opinion. In 1874 she founded the London School of Medicine for Women, while still actively lobbying for a change in the law. Even now there were still influential pockets of resistance, including the Board of Examiners of the Royal College of Surgeons of England who, in January 1876, chose to resign rather than allow three women (including Jex-Blake) to sit the diploma in midwifery. Eventually, parliamentary legislation in 1876 opened up medical and university education

to women, and empowered all medical examining bodies to examine women candidates.

By 1894, the situation for women had improved so much that the *British Medical Journal* ⁸ commented : "It is almost as easy at this moment for a woman to get a complete medical education in England, Scotland or Ireland as it is for a man." While this was certainly an exaggeration, it is also true that more women were entering the medical profession than ever before, and by the end of the nineteenth century virtually all British universities were open to women for training and education in medicine.

Eleanor Davies-Colley became the first woman FRCS Eng. by examination, in 1911. The daughter of a surgeon, she had trained at the London School of Medicine and in 1907 was appointed House Surgeon at the New Hospital for Women. Highly regarded by both colleagues and students, her distinguished career spanned thirty years, during which time she held several senior appointments.

In 1919 there were only four women Fellows of the Royal College of Surgeons of England; by 1990, this number had risen to 320, still just five per cent of the total number of Fellows worldwide. Many more women doctors are now trained as surgeons in various surgical specialities all over the globe. Still male domination is predominant. While some might argue that the under-representation of women in the surgical specialties is attributable to lingering prejudices and stereotypical roles of the sexes, the true reasons may be more complex than this, and have at least as much to do with career structures and the allocation of time and responsibilities which render other specialties more attractive for women.

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सारांश

शल्यचिकित्सा में औरतों का इतिहास - एक विचार

- सिसिर के. मजुन्दार

चिकित्स के क्षेत्र में एवं शल्यचिकित्सा के क्षेत्र में औरतों का इतिहास कम से कम ईसा पूर्व 3500 वर्ष पुराना है। प्राचीन मिस्र देश के मंदिरों एवं मकबरों की दीवारों पर प्राप्त चित्रणों में उन्हें शल्यचिकित्सा करते हुए दिखाया गया है। इसके अतिरिक्त ऐसे भी प्रमाण मिले हैं जिस से कि यह पता चलता है कि प्राचीन सुमेरिया, बेबिलोन, यूनान तथा रोम आदि देशों में भी औरतें शल्यचिकित्सा करती थीं। इस प्रकार यहां पर शल्यचिकित्सा के क्षेत्र में औरतों के इतिहास के विषय में कालानुक्रमिक रूप में एक विचार प्रस्तुत किया गया है।