First Woman Doctor of Medicine

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Elizabeth Blackwell in 1849 to receive a medical degree in the U.S.

Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910) became the first woman to receive an MD degree from an American medical school. She was born in Bristol in 1821. Her father, Samuel, died in 1838 leaving his wife and nine children in the lurch. After his death, Elizabeth and her sisters began teaching and set up a school to provide the family with financial stability. She had graduated from Geneva Medical College in New York and became the first woman to receive an MD degree. Elizabeth worked in the clinics in Paris and London for 2 years, where unfortunately she lost sight in one eye because of a purulent infection. She returned to America in 1851 and established a medical practice in New York. In 1853 she opened her own dispensary. Her sister Emily, who had also qualified as a doctor, joined her and together with Dr Marie Zakrzewska, they opened the New York Infirmary for Women and Children in 1857. She decided to move back to Britain in 1869 where she founded the National Health Society in 1871 which aimed to educate people about the benefits of hygiene and healthy lifestyles. Their motto “Prevention is better than Cure” is a phrase that still exists true and the world nowadays is following the same during the pandemic of COVID-19.

In 1859 she became the first woman to have her name entered in the British General Medical Council’s medical register. In 1874, Elizabeth Blackwell British physicians Sophia Jex-Blake and Elizabeth Garret Anderson established the London School of Medicine for Women, primarily preparing women for the licensing exam of Apothecaries Hall. In 1875, Elizabeth was appointed professor of Gynaecology. Elizabeth published many books and was involved in a number of reform movements including moral reform, hygiene, medical education, preventative medicine, sanitation, and family planning. She had battled all her life and her successes had been monumental. In 1881, only 25 female doctors were registered in England and Wales but by 1911 there were 495 registered. Elizabeth Blackwell died in Hastings, England, on 31 May 1910. “U.S. Postal Service has honored Blackwell’s achievements and contributions to history with a commemorative stamp in 1974.”

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How to cite this article: Jha AK. First Woman Doctor of Medicine. J Assoc Physicians India 2023;71(2):94–94.