



# Women and Medicine

## Medical Women of the West

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*The presence in the West of women physicians with degrees from regular medical schools spans a period of approximately 130 years. Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania graduated many of these early women physicians. The first woman medical graduate of a western school was Lucy M. Field Wanzer, who finished in 1876 at the Department of Medicine, University of California in San Francisco. Soon thereafter, schools that would become Stanford University and the Oregon Health Sciences University schools of medicine, as well as the newly founded University of Southern California, were contributing to the pool of women physicians. The University of Michigan Medical School, the first coeducational state medical school, also educated some of the western women physicians, who by 1910 numbered about 155.*

*This regional account of the progress of women physicians as they strove to become an integral part of the profession emphasizes the familiar themes of altruism, ingenuity, and perseverance that characterized their efforts.*

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Women graduates of regular, as opposed to homeopathic and eclectic, medical schools were practicing medicine on the West Coast within 30 years of 1849 when Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman to receive a medical degree in the United States, graduated at Geneva (New York) Medical College.

Simultaneous social movements and events—the founding of the suffrage movement in 1848, the California gold rush of 1849, and the opening of the Female Medical College of Pennsylvania, founded in Philadelphia in 1850 by men who were Quakers—each played a role in facilitating the entrance of women into the professional world. The drama and melodrama associated with the quest of women for a place in medicine provide endless material for those who would take up the pen.

The theme of service, the natural extension of the historic function of women, and their unique identification with the childbearing and child-rearing aspects of life motivated them to become physicians. They had long been midwives and nurses—the care givers—to women, children, and the elderly in their families and communities. Public health and preventive medicine were logical associated interests. Once the formidable barriers to medical school admission had been surmounted, women discovered the scientific attractions of medicine.

The contributions of women homeopaths and eclectics should be acknowledged. Although the quality of their practices varied greatly, their motivation to serve as medical practitioners was real. Women were welcomed into homeopathic and eclectic schools when doors were closed to them at regular medical schools.

The perseverance of women in establishing their own

medical schools when admission was denied them elsewhere, in setting up their own dispensaries, clinics, and hospitals to provide practical training for themselves, in founding nursing schools, and in pushing their way into the medical societies is a fascinating saga. Their families, mentors, supporting friendships, and their community allies were critical ingredients in their success.

The first woman to practice in California is generally agreed to have been Elizer Pfeifer Stone (1819-1880), a German-born and -educated obstetrician who had practiced in New York. She arrived with her husband in Nevada City, California, in 1857 and located in San Francisco six years later. The specifics of her credentials are in doubt—it is unclear whether she attended or was a diplomate of a German medical school. Dr Rebecca A. Howard (1828-1896) arrived in San Francisco in 1864 after training in Philadelphia. She would later have a daughter, Kate, who would graduate in medicine in 1885 from the Toland Medical College, later to become the University of California, San Francisco, School of Medicine. Euthanasia S. Meade (1836-1895), whose given name assures her inclusion in any record of the era, and who was an 1869 graduate of Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania, came in the same year. Dr Charlotte Blake Brown (1846-1904), an 1874 graduate of what is now known as the Medical College of Pennsylvania,\* had the distinction of being a resident of California who traveled East for a medical education. Her family had moved to California in 1851 from Philadelphia, crossing the Isthmus of Panama. Her father, a minister, established a boys' school in Benicia, California. Later assignments took the family to Chile and by

\*1850, Female Medical College of Pennsylvania; 1867, the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania; 1970, the Medical College of Pennsylvania.

chance to Tahiti. These experiences instilled a missionary zeal in Charlotte Brown that was to last a lifetime. She returned to New England, graduated from Elmira College in New York, married, and settled with her husband in Napa, California. After having three children and reading medicine with her preceptor, Dr Charles Nichols, she chose to seek a medical education in Philadelphia. Her second year was spent as a hospital intern. This firsthand experience taught her the value of practical training. With Dr Martha Bucknall and Dr Sarah E. Browne, she founded the Pacific Dispensary for Women and Children in San Francisco, which was renamed and incorporated in 1885 as Children's Hospital and Training School for Nurses. This latter institution, which flourishes today, was the first hospital in the West to offer internships and residency training to women.

Dr Elizabeth A. Follansbee (1839-1917), a Massachusetts native, was a school teacher and friend of Dr Charlotte Brown in Napa, and she followed Brown's path to Philadelphia. En route she had studied at the University of California, San Francisco, and at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, which was the first state school to accept women medical students. She settled in Los Angeles, became the first woman in the West to have an academic appointment, and chaired the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Southern California.

By 1876, the School of Medicine of the University of California, San Francisco, had graduated its first woman, Lucy M. Field Wanzer (1841-1933), a 33-year-old school teacher, who was intellectually and emotionally able to cope with the hazing she received. She was thus the first woman graduate of a western medical school. The Medical School of the Pacific (later Stanford University School of Medicine) graduated Alice Higgins in 1877 and Anabel McG. Stuart in 1878. Western state medical schools were coeducational from the beginning, but the University of California had to be reminded of this by its regents when Lucy Wanzer and another female applicant were at first denied admission.

Other western medical schools were now also admitting women students. The sisters Angela L. and Ellen A. J. Ford graduated in 1877 from the Willamette University, Salem, Oregon (later the University of Oregon Medical School and since 1974 the Oregon Health Sciences University School of Medicine, Portland). The first class to graduate from the Medical Department of the University of Southern California included one woman, Lula Talbot. The year was 1888.

In a sequestered society in Utah, Mormon women of intellectual promise were being encouraged to study medicine by Brigham Young. Earlier there had been a mistrust of the medical profession by this religious sect. Midwifery had been an important assignment for women because of the many children born during the early period of colonization. Women saw the need but had difficulty responding to the call in the middle of their own childbearing years. Two women, first Romania Bunnell Pratt-Penrose (1839-1932), followed by Mary Ellis Reynolds Shipp (1847-1939), matriculated at Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania in the 1870s. They returned to Utah to practice obstetrics, pediatrics, and public health. Nurses' training and instruction were also a part of their activities. They both lived to be older than 90 years and were revered by their communities.

Dr Bethenia Owens-Adair (1840-1926) was the first female regular physician to practice medicine in Oregon. Born in Missouri, she moved westward in a covered wagon in

infancy, taught school, attended an eclectic school in Philadelphia in 1873, practiced a few years, and then enrolled in the University of Michigan School of Medicine from which she graduated in 1880 at the age of 40. She was prominent in several sections of Oregon, promoting woman's suffrage and eugenics.

Dr Maria M. Dean (1858-1919), a University of Wisconsin undergraduate, obtained an MD degree from Boston University School of Medicine in 1883 and became the first woman to practice in the Montana Territory. She had a large practice among women and children and was the first woman to read a paper before the Montana Medical Society, "Typhoid Fever in Infants." As was usual for women physicians, she was active in community affairs. She was identified with the Board of Education, the Young Women's Christian Association, and as an advocate of improved working conditions for women.

Dr Helen C. Roberts (1861-1931), the first woman to be an intern at Cook County Hospital in Chicago, practiced for 32 years in Great Falls, Montana.

Dr Mary Babcock Moore Atwater (1858-1941), an early force behind the establishment of the State Tuberculosis Hospital at Galen, Montana, started her career in this state by being the physician for the Gold Leaf Mining Company, making her rounds on horseback over narrow mountain trails.

Chloe Annette Buckel (1833-1912), another graduate of Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania, settled in Oakland, California, in 1877. Her medical peregrinations following graduation in 1858 included association with Doctors Elizabeth and Emily Blackwell in New York, heading an army nurses' service during the Civil War, working for 12 years with Dr Marie Zakrzewska in the New England Hospital at Boston, and studying for 2 years in Europe. In California she was largely responsible for the certification of milk by the state.

In 1876, after the passage of the Medical Practice Act, and not without much deliberation, five women physicians were admitted to the California State Medical Society at its San Francisco convention. Women gradually gained acceptance into the county medical societies; Lucy Wanzer became a member of the San Francisco Medical Society in 1877. Dr Mary McGill soon followed, joining the Sacramento society. Women were never prominent office holders in the early years, with the exception of Dr Charlotte Le Breton Johnson Baker (1855-1937), a Cooper College (later Stanford) graduate of 1890, who was President of the San Diego County Medical Society in 1898. Other offices were filled by women as well, which situation was often called a "gynecratic complication." Rose Talbot Bullard (1864-1915) was the one and only woman president of the Los Angeles County Medical Association (from 1903 to 1904).

These historical notes do not presume to be inclusive but rather are an attempt to capture some of the color and ardor of those times and persons.

By 1910 it was estimated that regular medical women numbered 155 in the West (5% of that category of physicians), women homeopaths 90 (15% of that group), and eclectics 45 (10% of that total). This may have reflected the national proportions at that time.

American Medical Association data show a total of 90,750 women physicians in the United States in 1987, 15.7% of the total number of persons with an MD degree.

These numbers foretell the entirely different story that will be written about medical women in the 21st century.

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Thoreau, New Mexico, Feb 20, 1920

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