

Medicine banner designed by Mary Lowndes for NUWSS march, 13 June 1908. The Women's Library collection at the London School of Economics



Activism

Many women doctors, and their male supporters, have engaged with debates surrounding their practice and pushed for open discussion and change. From battling exclusion to finding acceptance in the profession and its training, to taking part in wider movements such as suffrage and equal pay campaigns, women doctors have actively shaped the field of medicine.

'The period ... is not perhaps very remote ... when ladies shall become fellows and even presidents of our colleges of physicians – and lady doctors superintend the healths of crowned heads.'
Dr James Adair, 1787

Professor Dame Jane Dacre, president of the RCP, 2014–18. Paul Benney, 2018. Royal College of Physicians



Dr Dorothy Christian Hare (1876–1967), by Frederick John Hayes Whicker, c.1955. Royal College of Physicians

Free entry

'This vexed question'

500 years of women in medicine
19 Sept 2018 – 18 Jan 2019

Events

Private view
19 September

Late opening with curator tour
4 October

Jobs for the boys? Breaking into medicine from non-traditional backgrounds
1 November

More events to be announced.

Book online:
www.history.rcplondon.ac.uk/events

@RCPmuseum #VexedQuestion

Royal College of Physicians, 11 St Andrews Place, Regent's Park, London NW1 4LE

Usual opening hours: Monday–Friday, 9am–5pm. Please note that opening times may vary – check online before your visit. Open the first Thursday of the month, 5–8pm

Library, Archive and Museum Services
Tel: +44 (0)20 3075 1543
Email: history@rcplondon.ac.uk

Step-free access. Closed: weekends, public holidays and for RCP ceremonies – see website for details.

Groups of six or more can visit the RCP by appointment only. Please email and we'd be delighted to advise you. The RCP is a busy conference venue and only groups led by RCP staff can explore the building.

Location: 5-minute walk from Great Portland Street and Regent's Park underground stations; 10-minute walk from Warren Street underground station.

Dr Dossibai Patel (1882–?), 1911. Courtesy of the Library and Archives Service, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine



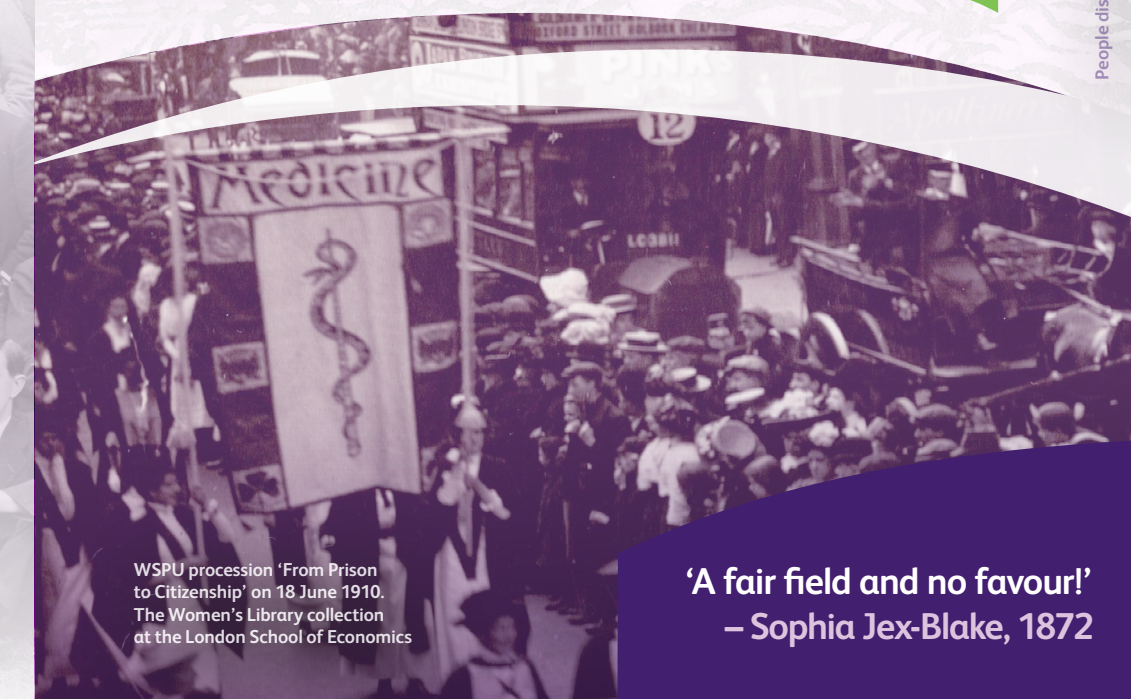
'This vexed question'

500 years of women in medicine

19 Sept 2018 – 18 Jan 2019

An exhibition revealing the stories of famous and previously hidden medical women

Free entry



WSPU procession 'From Prison to Citizenship' on 18 June 1910. The Women's Library collection at the London School of Economics

'A fair field and no favour!'
– Sophia Jex-Blake, 1872

People distilling, 1550. Wellcome Collection

‘It is high time that this unnatural and preposterous attempt ... to establish a race of feminine doctors should be exploded.’

British Medical Journal, 1862

‘This vexed question’

Women physicians, apothecaries, surgeons, writers of recipes, nurses and midwives have worked within a male-dominated medical world for centuries.

Their involvement has always provoked intense debate. A commentator in 1870 described the ‘vexed question’ of women in medicine. Should women be allowed to train as doctors? Were they physically and mentally capable? How would their male colleagues react?

In 2018, as we mark the 70th anniversary of the National Health Service, and the centenaries of voting rights for women and the end of the First World War, the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) looks back over key debates in its 500-year history that provoke questions around gender and medicine – many of which are still ‘vexing’ today.

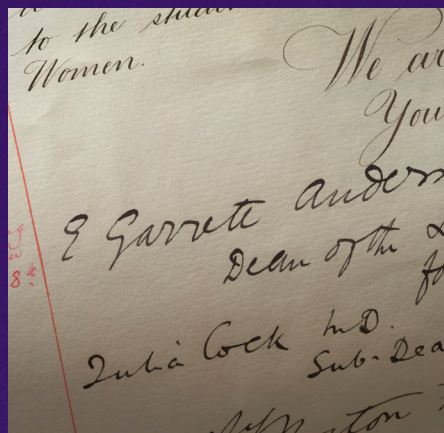
Discover the histories of celebrated female medical pioneers, and uncover the extraordinary stories of the previously hidden women of medicine.

Women doctors and the Royal College of Physicians

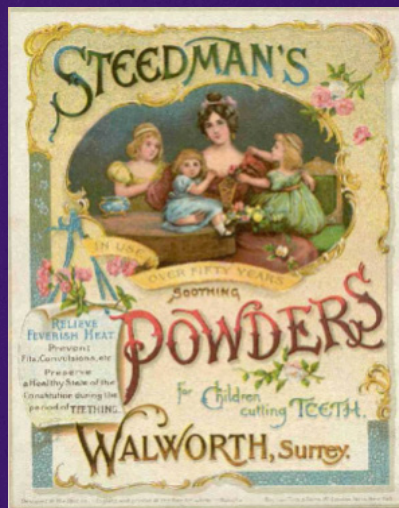
Over its 500-year history, the RCP’s response to women medical practitioners has been complex. Officially opposed to female physicians for nearly 400 years, in reality it sometimes looked the other way. In the 19th century, Elizabeth Garrett challenged the RCP’s regulations which excluded women. After decades of debate, women were finally allowed to become members in 1909. More recently, RCP-led initiatives have explored gender debates in the medical profession, including the gender pay gap.

‘Kitchin physic’

Despite being excluded from formal practice for centuries, women have often been experienced and knowledgeable medical practitioners as carers to their families and friends, sharing medical information through handwritten and published books. Viewing women as primary carers in a domestic setting has influenced debates around their public and professional roles. This stereotype was reinforced through advertising and images and is still prominent today.



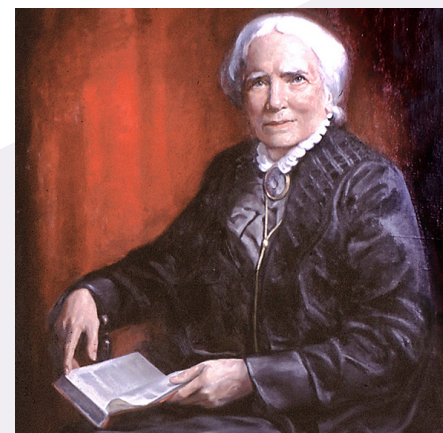
Petition from the London School of Medicine for Women to the RCP, 1895. Photography by John Chase, ©RCP



Advertisement for Steedman’s powders, late 19th century. Royal Pharmaceutical Society Museum

Who was the first woman doctor?

The first registered British woman doctor was Elizabeth Blackwell in 1859. However, women working in medicine have called themselves ‘doctor’ since the 1100s, and formal licences were available through the Church of England. The ‘Edinburgh Seven’ group of women lost their fight to take a medical degree in Britain in the late-19th century – women finally won this right in 1882, although the battle to study on an equal footing to men was still not over.



Dr Elizabeth Blackwell (1821–1910), by Joseph Stanley Kozlowski, 1905. Upstate Medical University, New York, Library; Wikimedia Commons

Gender norms

‘Woman as a doctor is a conceit contradictory to nature’
The Lancet, 1878

Expectations about ‘natural’ male and female roles have shaped medical practice. For centuries, women were seen to have a biological disadvantage, and ‘manly’ qualities such as physical strength, mental fortitude and discretion were considered essential for a successful medical career. In reality, women have been vital in family businesses and worked as apothecaries, surgeons and midwives. A male physician’s family was often critical to his success, with the support of wives and daughters allowing him to achieve his potential.



Drug jar, c.1700 Royal College of Physicians/Victor Hoffbrand collection

Midwifery

Traditionally considered a woman’s role, arguments about the gender of midwives have repeatedly arisen over the centuries. In the past, men were not allowed into the birthing chamber, but in the 18th century man-midwives approached birth differently. Today the increase in practising male midwives shows that the debate still continues.

Acceptable spheres

Certain medical spheres have always been more acceptable for women. Herbal medicine, midwifery and the treatment of ‘women’s diseases’ were linked to natural feminine skills, and some women excelled in areas less palatable to their male colleagues, including paediatrics, palliative care and venereal disease. Unusual circumstances, such as war, opened up previously unacceptable spheres to women doctors, surgeons and nurses.



Smellie’s forceps, c.1750. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. Photography by John Chase, ©RCP



A doctor with five nurses: studio portrait, 1900. Wellcome Collection