

WORKSHEET FOR KS3 AND GCSE HISTORY

Women in medicine 1

The struggle for equal rights

With recently published statistics indicating record numbers of women practicing medicine in Britain it is difficult to evoke the difficulties and obstructions women faced in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, in qualifying and practicing as doctors. There was widespread prejudice against women entering any of the medical professions, and in many quarters against their receiving any higher education. A medical career was considered by the male establishment to be far too hard, both physically and intellectually, for women. Women were too temperamental and emotional to be capable of the dispassionate judgements that the practice of medicine would demand. The practice of medicine was completely at odds with the 'nature' of women, and any woman who undertook it would become 'unnatural' and 'masculine'. You simply couldn't be both a proper woman and a proper doctor. All kinds of false theories were given during this period including that the profession would interfere with women's fertility.

Women's struggle for equal rights in the medical profession was a long and difficult road, but due to the work and dedication of Elizabeth Garrett Anderson, Elizabeth Blackwell and Sophia Jex-Blake it became easier for other women to train as doctors.

Elizabeth Garrett Anderson was born in 1836 in Whitechapel, East London. Her father was a successful businessman, which enabled him to send his daughter to school. At the age of 24, Anderson met Elizabeth Blackwell – the first American woman to become a physician – in 1859. This meeting apparently inspired her to train as a nurse. In 1865 she was accepted into the British Society of Apothecaries, but unfortunately, this did not set a precedent as the Society then changed its rules – stopping other women becoming members.

However this did not deter Anderson, who after many rejections from British universities, went to France to study medicine. In 1870 she qualified as a doctor. Still unable to register and practice in Britain she then decided to set up a new hospital for women in 1872. This later became the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson Hospital, which in 2001 was amalgamated into University College Hospital. This hospital was staffed entirely by women. In order for this hospital to be staffed by women a place for them to train would need to be set up. Two years later Anderson, Blackwell Blake and Thomas Huxley founded the London School of Medicine for Women.

In 1873, Anderson – largely by default – gained membership to the British Medical Association. (At the time there was no rule against women joining, but in reaction to Anderson's bold move the BMA quickly changed its rules. This meant that Anderson was only female member until 1892 – when they finally voted to admit women).

In 1876 the Medical Act was passed finally allowing women to train as doctors. The following year an agreement was formed with the Royal Free Hospital allowing students at the London School of Medicine for Women to complete their clinical training there.

Questions

- 1. Why could women not be doctors in the 19th century? What reasons were given?**
- 2. Where did Elizabeth Garrett Anderson train to be a doctor and why did she have to go there to do it?**
- 3. What did she set up in 1872? Why was this important?**
- 4. In your opinion, how important is Elizabeth Garrett Anderson in the history of medicine. Explain your answer.**
- 5. If Elizabeth Garrett Anderson was alive today, what would you like to say to her?**