

# Medicine in Stamps

## Elizabeth Blackwell

### (1821-1910):

## America's first woman doctor



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Elizabeth Blackwell never wanted to be a doctor. Illness embarrassed her, and the sight of blood horrified her. A dying friend once urged Elizabeth to study medicine, saying that her suffering would have been greatly decreased if the physician had been a woman. Elizabeth “at once repudiated the suggestion as an impossible one, saying that I hated everything connected with the body, and could not bear the sight of a medical book.” Despite this initial aversion, in 1849, Elizabeth Blackwell became the first woman in the United States to graduate with a medical degree.

**Moral struggle:** Elizabeth Blackwell was born on February 3, 1821 in Counterslip, England, the third daughter of nine children, to Samuel Blackwell, a sugar refiner, and Hannah Lane. When Elizabeth was 11 years old, the family moved to Cincinnati after their sugar refinery burned down. In 1838, Elizabeth, along with her mother and elder sisters, established a private boarding school for girls, and she later taught in Kentucky and the Carolinas. In other words, she was well on her way towards a teaching career when her dying friend in 1845 first broached the subject of medical school.

Elizabeth had rejected the idea not only because she disliked human biology, but also because the notion of a woman in medicine was at odds with then prevailing precepts of femininity and social propriety. However, Elizabeth gradually came around to liking the thought of becoming a doctor.

In her biography, she acknowledged that “*the idea of winning a doctor's degree gradually assumed the aspect of a great moral struggle, and the moral fight possessed immense attraction for me.*” Despite her physician friends all declaring the idea impractical and imprudent, Elizabeth was not discouraged, and the implausibility of her ambition served only to embolden her. She had also discovered that the term “*female physician*” was then used to describe female abortionists. An avid proponent of maternity, she felt that abortion perverted and destroyed the integrity of motherhood, and was horrified “*that the honorable term ‘female physician’ should be exclusively applied to those women who carried on this shocking trade . . . It was an utter degradation of what might and should become a noble position for women.*”



**Paving the way:** Elizabeth applied to numerous medical schools, but met with uniform rejection. Then in October 1847, she received a surprise acceptance letter from Geneva Medical College in upstate New York. History records that the faculty had referred her application to the student body, asking for a vote but confident of a sound rejection. On the other hand, the young men assumed the inquiry to be a joke, and instead voted unanimously to accept her. Once in, Elizabeth had to endure the scorn of the townspeople, and the skepticism of her professors and fellow students. Yet, she triumphed by graduating at the top of her class,

and became the first woman to obtain a medical degree in the United States.

Following graduation, Elizabeth went to Paris, hoping to pursue postgraduate training, but France proved even less hospitable, and she had to resign herself to studying midwifery at La Maternité. There, she contracted purulent ophthalmia from an infected infant, which left her with permanent blindness in one eye. She eventually moved to London, England, where she studied at St. Bartholomew's Hospital under the famous English surgeon, Sir James Paget.

**Ostracised:** In 1851, Elizabeth returned to New York, but she was denied all hospital and dispensary privileges. Undeterred, she opened her own clinic in a single rented room, which eventually grew into the New York Dispensary for Poor Women and Children. The facility provided the few women who entered the profession a chance to gain hospital training. Although women were beginning to be accepted into select medical schools, no hospital in the United States offered women physicians the opportunity to practise their skills. By 1868, Elizabeth realised that the ideal training of women physicians required a dedicated medical school and teaching hospital, and so she founded the Women's Medical College of the New York Infirmary. The college, which remained operational until 1899, offered women a medical education that equaled that of other medical colleges. Besides, it was the first in the country to include in its core curriculum a course in public health and preventative medicine.

**Zealous reformer:** Elizabeth returned to London, England in 1869, and became its first registered woman physician. Unmarried, she spent the rest of her life championing the medical woman's movement. She believed that women in medicine promoted gender equality, and at the same time improved the quality of medical practice. She was critical of the transformation of medicine from a humanitarian system that focused on the patient, to one of science whose emphasis was on the illness itself. The responsibility of a physician, she maintained, was not only to cure the disease through medicine, but also to relieve the suffering of the patient through empathy. Believing in "*the pity and sympathy which tend to make every woman the born foe of cruelty and injustice,*" Elizabeth saw in the woman doctor a "mother model" that combined the best of skill, knowledge and caring.

**Continuing influence:** Despite her endeavours to integrate women into the field of medicine, American society was not ready for the reforms that Elizabeth advocated. Soon after her graduation, her own school, Geneva Medical College, declared her medical education a failure, and subsequently denied admission to other women students. Harvard Medical School followed suit, and passed a resolution that explicitly excluded women; this remained in effect until 1946. However, the medical woman's movement Elizabeth began proved unstoppable. Inspired by her achievements, many women enrolled in medical colleges that were willing to accept them. According to an 1870 census, some 525 trained women doctors practised in America, more than the total number of women doctors in the rest of the world. The impact of Elizabeth's movement is still evident today in the growing numbers of women applying to and attending medical school in the United States. The Association of American Medical Colleges recently reported that the gap between male and female applicants has disappeared. In fact, there is a continuing trend in female applicants outnumbering male applicants. In 2003, more women than men applied to medical school, and for the entering class of 2004, the ratio was 49.6 to 50.4. Today, a quarter of all American doctors are women, and this figure will rapidly increase to one in three by 2010. By her example and courage, Elizabeth Blackwell has earned her rightful place as a pathfinder in the annals of medical history.

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