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Women in Medicine

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By Melissa Mandell, Public Historian

The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) reported that 2016 saw the number of women enrolled in medical school reach a 10-year high, with 10,474 female students. This number reflects relative parity with the number of men in medical school: 166 years after the first women trained to be MDs, about half of all medical students and 46 percent of all physicians-in-training are women. Despite these impressive numbers and an increased high-profile advocacy for training women in STEM professions, some discrepancies remain. According to the AAMC, women make up a little more than a third of full-time academic medicine faculty, and women are less likely than men to be full medical school professors. Two-thirds of African American applicants to medical school are women, but the overall racial and ethnic diversity of physicians does not reflect the US population. This continuing lag in professional opportunities, if not educational ones, has both historically informed roots and solutions. This column features digital collections about the history of women in medicine that draw on primary source materials to celebrate their accomplishments and reveal their challenges. These resources vary in format, document accessibility, and interpretive context, but all provide access to unique materials that trace the arc of women in medicine both in broad strokes and in the more granular aspects of their daily struggles and successes.

The Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard

The Schlesinger Library hosts a digital version of its Blackwell Family Papers at schlesinger.radcliffe.harvard.edu/onlinecollections/blackwell. While Samuel and Hannah Blackwell had nine children who carried on their parents’ activism during the nineteenth century—on issues including women’s suffrage, health care, and education reform—Elizabeth and Emily are perhaps the most well known. The sisters were two of the earliest credentialed women physicians in the United States, earning their MDs in 1849 and 1854, respectively, as well as training in Europe. While the collection spans four generations of family diaries, correspondence, sermons, lectures, and political speeches, of particular note is the correspondence between Elizabeth and Emily, which provides a window into their experiences as pioneers in medicine in the United States and Europe. The letters from Elizabeth to Emily describe teaching in North Carolina, her experiences during medical training, her medical practice in Europe, and the condition of women, and they include details about vivisection, lectures, and her patients. Letters from Emily to Elizabeth likewise discuss medical training for women, patients, and medical practice in the United States, Edinburgh, and London; her transatlantic journey.

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by ship; as well news and opinions about the Blackwell family. Also included are a draft partnership agreement between Emily and Elizabeth and miscellaneous writings and clippings about Emily Blackwell and the New York Infirmary for Women and Children, the hospital she founded in 1853. The Blackwell Family Papers digital collection is expansive far beyond Elizabeth and Emily’s correspondence, however, and users can filter and select for proper names, location, series, subseries, and document type to narrow the search. No item transcripts are provided, but the document viewer has options for zooming in, scrolling, and book views, and each item has a link to the collection finding aid and related materials for further exploration. While the navigation can be a bit clunky, the scope and breadth of items are impressive and rewarding.

The Center for the History of Medicine at the Francis A. Countway Library of Medicine

Another Harvard-affiliated institution, the Center for the History of Medicine features six digital exhibits from its women in medicine collections at collections.countway.harvard.edu/onview/exhibits?tag=Archives+for+Women+in+Medicine. The exhibits include a variety of document formats, such as personal papers, handwritten lectures, and oral histories, and curated interpretation that tells the stories of pioneering women in medicine in the twentieth century. Several offer interactive opportunities, such as the option to contribute a document transcription or provide your own story. Standout exhibits are “Leading by Teaching,” collections.countway.harvard.edu/onview/exhibits/show/hayandreid and “The Stethoscope Sorority,” collections.countway.harvard.edu/onview/exhibits/show/stethoscope-sorority, which focus on women physicians’ teaching, mentoring, advocacy for women, and community-building as related to their medical careers.

Drexel University College of Medicine Legacy Center Archives and Special Collections

Drexel University’s website Women Physicians, 1850–1970s, xdl.drexelmed.edu/womanmd.php, is a vast digital collection of “correspondence, scrapbooks, clippings, college records, images, diaries, publications, and ephemera documenting the history of women physicians beginning with the first medical school for women, Woman’s Medical College of Pennsylvania.” One particular highlight is the collection of digitized issues of The Medical Missionary from 1941 to 1960 at xdl.drexelmed.edu/xsearch.php?search_by=Society%20of%20Catho-
and in the immediate aftermath of World War I and in the rural United States during the Great Depression. Items featured include diaries, correspondence, telegrams, photographs, scrapbooks, and reports, all with text and audio transcripts as well as interpretive text and discussion questions. Collectively, the stories illustrate both the extraordinary and mundane obstacles and hard-won triumphs of women physicians in their first 120 years.

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