

Article - CPCS Honors Women's History Month

"If society will not admit of woman's free development, then society must be remodeled." Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell

Each May 8th welcomes International Women's Day, which is a focal point in Women's History Month, a United States celebration that grew from one week in 1980 to the entire month of March in 1986 – centuries after the denial of rights, subjugation and abuse women continue to fight against through today. This month's theme is **"Providing Healing, Promoting Hope,"** recognizing the work of caregivers and frontline workers during the pandemic, and the many ways women of all cultures have provided both healing and hope throughout history.

Any thought on the history of women and health must consider Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, who in 1849, became the first licensed medical professional in the United States. Moving to the United States from England at age twelve, Elizabeth and her family endured poverty resulting from her father's early death, resulting in she, her mother and sisters turning to teaching for survival. While caring for a friend dying of ovarian cancer, Dr. Blackwell learned of her friend's wish to have had a female physician help her through that struggle. This experience, along with mentoring from physicians she lived with, led Elizabeth to seek admission to medical school. She was rejected by all the schools to which she applied, save Geneva College in New York, which only sent her an acceptance letter as a joke. Elizabeth Blackwell nonetheless enrolled and prospered, despite experiencing harsh bias and discrimination in school and her local community, ultimately graduating first in her class.

"My whole life is devoted unreservedly to the service of my sex. The study and practice of medicine is in my thought but one means to a great end,...of which I have dreamed day and night, from my earliest childhood, for which I would offer up my life with triumphant thanksgiving, if martyrdom could secure that glorious end:— the true ennoblement of woman, the full harmonious development of her unknown nature, and the consequent redemption of the whole human race." Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell, 1848

As a professional, she suffered bias and indignities that kept her from practicing medicine as an equal, but Dr. Blackwell still distinguished herself by emphasizing preventative care, particularly among male doctors who caused epidemics by not washing their hands between patients.

In 1951, on returning to New York after residences in Europe, and due to ongoing discrimination that adversely impacted her practice, she opened a clinic to treat poor women. In 1857, Dr. Blackwell, her sister and a colleague opened the New York Infirmary for Women and Children, which provided positions for women physicians, and was the first in the country to train a black woman to be a doctor and women as nurses. During the Civil War, the clinic also trained women to work in the battlefields, and the first social services in the city were provided by the hospital. In 1868, Blackwell opened a medical college in New York City, before returning to England as

a professor of gynecology at the London School of Medicine for Women, where she taught and wrote of her life and medicine.

“It’s not easy to be a pioneer — but oh, is it fascinating!” Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell.

On this Women’s Month 2022, please take time to consider the women in our lives who serve as healers, from our mothers and friends, through the nurses and doctors who sacrifice so we and our clients can experience lives that provide health and meaning. Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell’s resilience and achievement offer a powerful image of the strength and determination of a woman who made a difference – how much more would she have accomplished if the barriers of bias and prejudice had not been in the way? Happy Women’s Month to all the women we work with and who touch our lives.