

Famous Names in Medicine

Sophia Jex-Blake 1840–1912

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Biographical notes

Sophia Jex-Blake was born in Hastings on 21 January 1840. She was the third and youngest child of elderly religious parents. Her brother, Thomas Jex-Blake was Headmaster of Rugby School (1874–87) and Dean of Wells (1891–1910). After attending boarding school, she went to Queen's College for Women, Harley Street, London in 1858, as a student and from 1859–61 as mathematics tutor. This college still exists and is now an independent school. Her early interest was in educational reform. Sophia Jex-Blake taught in Germany for a time and later lived in the United States from 1865–68. Under the influence of Dr Lucy Sewall, she became interested in medicine and began a regular course of medical study in New York in 1868. However, on the death of her father in the same year, she returned to England with the intention of continuing her medical studies.

In England Elizabeth Garrett (Anderson) had qualified as a doctor in 1865 through the examinations of the Society of Apothecaries. This resulted in the exclusion of women from future examinations. Thus all avenues to entering the medical profession in Britain were closed to women. After being refused entry to London University, Sophia Jex-Blake became virtually the leader of the movement to open the medical profession to women. Along with five other women, she attempted to graduate at Edinburgh University. The well-documented 'struggle' in Edinburgh lasted from 1869 to 1873 and ended in failure. Nevertheless, the women had gained some publicity and public sympathy.

In 1874 Sophia Jex-Blake founded the London School of Medicine for Women. Clinical tuition was provided at the Royal Free Hospital from 1877. Meanwhile she went to Berne where she graduated MD. The legal question of women doctors was discussed in parliament from 1873 and she worked behind the scenes. In 1876 the Russell Gurney Enabling Act became law. It enabled medical examination bodies to examine women. The King's and Queen's College of Physicians, Dublin (now the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland) first used this power and Sophia Jex-Blake took the licentiate and so was able to get her name on the Medical Register in 1877, thereby giving her a legal right to practise.

In 1878 she returned to Edinburgh to practise. She founded the Edinburgh Hospital for Women and Children in 1885 and, in 1886, the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women, which continued for 10 years. It closed partly because she was unable by nature to conciliate those who might have worked with her and partly because some students were drawn off to the medical school which was added to Queen Margaret College, Glasgow University in 1890.

In 1899 she gave up active work and retired to Rotherfield, Sussex where she died on 7 January 1912.

Sophia Jex-Blake confronted problems

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directly and was often criticized for her 'difficult character'. Perhaps, for this reason, despite leaving much material behind in the form of letters and diaries, she is less well known than Elizabeth Blackwell and Elizabeth Garrett Anderson.

Publications by Sophia Jex-Blake

A visit to some American schools and colleges.
Macmillan, 1867.

Medicine as a profession for women. In Butler, Josephine (ed.). *Woman's work and woman's culture.* Macmillan, 1869. pp. 78–120.

Puerperal Fever. An enquiry into its nature and treatment. A graduation thesis. Berne; Brighton (printed), 1877.

The care of infants. A manual for mothers and nurses. Macmillan, 1884.

Medical women. A thesis and a history. Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 2nd edn., 1886.

Medical women. *Nineteenth Century* 22 (129) November 1887. 692–707.

For publications on women in medicine see Elizabeth Blackwell 1821–1910 in *MHWLG Newsletter* 18, 28 December 1982.

Publications which refer to Sophia Jex-Blake include

Hammond, J. L. & Hammond, Barbara. *James Stansfeld. A Victorian champion of sex equality.* Longmans, Green and Co, 1932.

Kaye, Elaine. *A history of Queen's College,* London. Chatto and Windus, 1972.

Lutzker, Edythe. *Women gain a place in medicine.* McGraw-Hill, 1969.

Miller, Florence Fenwick. Pioneer medical women (A record and a remembrance). *Fortnightly Review* 116 (New Series), November 1924, 692–706.

Stansfeld, James. Medical women. *Nineteenth Century* 1 (5), July 1877. 888–901.

Thorne, Isabel. *Sketch of the foundation and development of the London School of Medicine for Women.* Hunter Street, Brunswick Square, London. Privately printed, 1915.

Todd, Margaret. *The life of Sophia Jex-Blake.* Macmillan, 1918.