

# WOMEN IN MEDICINE THROUGH TIME

- Maz What have you got to say about women in medicine?
- Chaz Well, until modern times, surely they were forbidden to practice?
- Maz Well, that's where you're absolutely wrong! Apparently, there were many women from Ancient times involved in medicine.
- Chaz Really? Give me some examples – give me the names of some female Egyptian doctors.
- Maz The *Iliad* mentions an Egyptian female doctor called Polydamna. And we know there was a medical school at Heliopolis for female student doctors, and another at a place called Sais which had female teachers as well.
- Chaz OK, what about the Greeks, then? Women were forbidden to leave the house in Ancient Greece.
- Maz Apparently that didn't stop there being many Greek women doctors! The temples of Hygeia and Panacea had female healers, there was a famous female Greek gynaecologist called Agnodice, and a Greek medical lecturer called Philista who was said to be so brilliant that students flocked to hear her!
- Chaz And then it all ended in the Middle Ages? I don't believe there were any women in medieval medicine.
- Maz Think about it - nuns cared for the sick in the infirmaries in their convents. The Hotel-Dieu was run by Augustinian nuns and is the oldest hospital in Paris, and a German nun called Hildegard of Bingen wrote two medical books, one on medicine, and another on physiology and the nature of disease. The medieval medical school in Salerno in Italy accepted women, and one of them, an Arab woman called Trotula, is recorded as being a well respected obstetrician and 'the wisest woman in the world.'
- Chaz OK, OK, so you've proved there were women in medicine, but surely these were the exceptions, not the rule? I'm sure that by medieval times men were driving women out of the medical profession.
- Maz Of course, you're right. There's a record of a Parisian woman doctor called Jacoba Felicie, who was put on trial in 1322 for practising medicine. Judging by the witnesses she called she was a very good doctor, but the guild of doctors wouldn't let her practice without a licence.
- Chaz So that was how they pushed women out of medicine. Women were excluded from education, and so they couldn't get the qualifications they needed to become a 'proper' doctor?
- Maz The other way they got rid of women healers, in those days, was that they burned them! Most villages had their 'wise woman.' They gave practical medical advice to people too poor to afford doctors, and they made up a few potions. But after the 15<sup>th</sup> century, they were likely to be accused of being a witch and put to death.
- Chaz So, no women in medicine by the Renaissance.
- Maz Except in midwifery! Childbirth has been the province of women since ancient times, and there are very few male midwives even today. Midwifery has always been a well respected profession. One English midwife, Margaret Mercer, was paid £84 in 1616 to go to Germany to attend the Duchess of Bohemia while she gave birth – that's a huge amount of money for those days!
- Chaz But the role of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century improved, didn't it? What about Florence Nightingale?
- Maz Well, I suspect the impact of Florence Nightingale is overrated. Her School of Nursing didn't produce many nurses, and she spent most of her life after the Crimean War in bed. People forget the huge importance of Mary Seacole, and of the Registration of Nurses Act of 1919. But yes, I agree, the profile and prestige of nursing did grow significantly after the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Chaz And the first female doctors qualified in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Elizabeth Blackwell got her degree in 1849, Elizabeth Garrett-Anderson qualified as a doctor in 1865 and Sophia Jex-Blake in 1877.

Maz Yes, but Elizabeth Blackwell, Elizabeth Garrett-Anderson and Sophia Jex-Blake were the exceptions. They only got through because they found *loopholes* in the rules which were designed to stop women getting into the medical profession and each time a woman found a loophole that allowed her in, the rules were changed to stop it happening again. In 1911 there were only 495 women on the Medical Register in Britain.

Chaz And then things changed after women gained access to university education?

Maz Well, this is the strange thing. They didn't. Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women were held back by social expectations as well as by education, so even when they got the right to become doctors, few of them took it up. As recently as 1965, only 7% of doctors were women.

Chaz But nowadays a quarter of all consultants, a third of all hospital doctors, and 60% of all medical students are women – so there must have been a change at *some* time. What changed things after 1965?

Maz Social expectations and women's liberation. That's what made the change.