

The pendulum shifts in one speciality

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Dear Editor,

Traditionally, medicine as a profession was entirely male-dominated and access to medical schools was a luxury that would only be afforded to our male counterparts. Through determination, resilience and competence, women gradually lay roots in the profession. This journey was marked by many challenges and achievements, with a few notable female figures paving the way for their successors.

The role of women in medicine can be traced back through time with reports of women practising in obstetrics and gynaecology in ancient Egypt, while in ancient Babylon, Greece and Rome, women carried out surgical procedures. Women were subsequently forced to take a back-seat where their place within the medical profession was concerned, and the only role that females could take up for centuries was that of a midwife.

Dr. Daisy Maude Orleman Robinson (1868-1942), widely lauded as the first female dermatologist in the United States of America, was the first woman to publish scholarly work in the field of dermatology. Following a fractured femur, she used herself as a case study and published a report in 1899 lamenting the lack of knowledge of physicians on the harmful effects of x-rays¹.

Dr. Rose Hirschler (1875-1940), one of the earliest female dermatologists, was regarded as the first woman to recommend radiation for the treatment of skin cancer. Hirschler also published scholarly papers on lichen sclerosus, skin cancer and syphilis. She was the second woman to be certified by the American Board of Dermatology, and the only female founder of the American Academy of Dermatology².

Dr. Agnes Forbes Blackadder Savill (1875-1964) became the first dermatologist to be appointed to St. John's Hospital for Skin Diseases, London, in 1907. This was one of the first appointments of a female consultant to a hospital that was not exclusively for female patients. Forbes Blackadder Savill's largest contribution to medicine was undoubtedly the use of the then state-of-the-art X-ray to study, diagnose and treat gas gangrene³.

Dr Loretta Joy Cummins (1883-1958) graduated with the degree of M.D. from Tufts Medical School in 1903. Thirteen years following qualification, Cummins became the first woman to

obtain a clinical role at Massachusetts General Hospital as an assistant in dermatology. In 1928, Cummins was appointed as a consultant dermatologist, the first female dermatologist in Boston. She was also the first female to successfully pass the dermatology board examinations in the United States, as well as the first female to become president of the New England Dermatological Society⁴.

These remarkable women and their illustrious careers have paved the way for women in dermatology today. Now one of three specialties with the highest percentage of female trainees and a consultant cohort of a female preponderance, dermatology is striding towards gender equality. This transition toward fair female representation was made possible by our formidable female predecessors, a feat for which we will be eternally grateful.

Declarations of Conflicts of Interest:

None declared.

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