

# Women in medicine and dermatology: history and advances\*

Katlein França<sup>1</sup>Jennifer Ledon<sup>2</sup>Jessica Savas<sup>2</sup>Keyvan Nouri<sup>3</sup>

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**Abstract:** The history of women in medicine has been marked by many challenges and achievements. Although the role of women in the "art of healing" can be traced back many centuries, only males are traditionally highlighted in history. Across antiquity, access to medical education was denied to females. Dermatology is a medical specialty in which women displayed particular skill and proficiency. Gradually, determination and competence allowed women to lay claim in an essentially male-dominated world. This article presents a brief review of the performance, progress and achievements of women in the history of medicine and dermatology.

**Keywords:** Dermatology; History; Medicine; Physicians, women; Women

The history of women in medicine is marked by challenges and achievements. Although the role of women in the "art of healing" can be traced back through time, traditionally only male figures are highlighted. Across antiquity, admission to medical school was denied to females and the medical profession was considered exclusively male-centered. In ancient Egypt, there are reports of women serving in areas such as obstetrics and gynecology. There are also reports of women practicing surgical procedures in ancient Babylon, Greece and Rome.<sup>1</sup> In the middle ages, those who tried to cure the sick using herbs and other natural products were labeled witches and were often burned at the stake.<sup>2</sup> The only medical role women were allowed to occupy for several centuries, was that of a midwife.

During the European Renaissance, some women challenged these traditions, the peculiar existence of Dr. James Barry (1799-1865) being one example. Possibly born as Margaret Bulkley, Dr. James gained admission to medical school, posing as man and thus became a renowned surgeon in the British army.<sup>3</sup>

The official entry of women in medical universities throughout several countries occurred only in the nineteenth century. In the United States, the first medical school for women, The Female Medical College of Pennsylvania, was founded in Philadelphia in 1850. In Brazil, only as recently as 1879, did Dom Pedro II allow women to pursue a medical career. Through the Leoncio de Carvalho reform, he authorized the enrollment of women in higher education levels, but warned that for them, separate seating would be designated in classes. It was in this oppressive environment that Elizabeth Blackwell (1821-1910) and Rita Lobato (1866-1954) became the first women to graduate in medicine in the United States and Brazil, respectively.

In the coming years, despite the numerous obstacles still in place, more and more women pursued a career in medicine. An important achievement in this plight was the creation of medical societies geared specifically toward the practice of women in medicine.

In 1915, the American Medical Women's Association and in 1919, the Medical Women International Association. These societies represented

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\* Work performed at the Department of Dermatology & Cutaneous Surgery- University of Miami, Miller School of Medicine - Miami, USA.

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<sup>1</sup> Medical Doctor/ Masters of Science -Volunteer Faculty- Assistant Professor- Department of Dermatology & Cutaneous Surgery- University of Miami, Miller School of Medicine - Miami, USA.

<sup>2</sup> BS - Fellow- Department of Dermatology & Cutaneous Surgery- University of Miami, Miller School of Medicine - Miami, USA.

<sup>3</sup> Medical Doctor - Professor of Dermatology, Ophthalmology & Otolaryngology University of Miami, Miller School of Medicine - Miami, USA.

a breakthrough for women who practiced medicine.<sup>4</sup> In Brazil, the same model was followed and in 1960 the Brazilian Association of Medical Women was founded.<sup>5</sup> These medical societies were created in order to strengthen the worldwide women's medical presence, combat discrimination and to discuss issues related to women's health.

Dermatology is a medical specialty in which women were able to stand out. While no one knows for sure when the field of dermatology was first officially developed, history shows that in ancient Egypt, some dermatological procedures were already in existence. For example, arsenic was used for the treatment of skin cancer.<sup>6</sup> One woman in particular, Cleopatra, drew attention for her devotion to the pursuit of beauty and skin care.

Cleopatra, via her milk immersion baths, discovered the benefits of lactic acid for skin hydration and also introduced the concepts of epilation. The hair removal ritual was performed with a formula comprised of sugar, oil and lime juice.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, modern dermatology emerged in Europe.<sup>7</sup> William Robert wrote the first book of Dermatology in 1797. In Brazil, meanwhile, dermatology officially began only in 1882 with the installation of the first service of skin diseases in Rio de Janeiro.

In the beginning of the history of dermatology, as in all other medical specialties, male performance was highlighted. It did not take long, though for women to also make a name for themselves in this field. In 1921, Dr. Rose Hirschler was the first female medical dermatologist to graduate in the United States. To the present day, her name is remembered and honored by the Women's Dermatology Society (WDS), by offering the Rose Hirschler award to prominent female dermatologists.

The WDS was founded in 1973, curiously, by a man. Dr. Walter Shelley, chief of dermatology at the University of Pennsylvania, noted that women dermatologists were always the minority in medical conferences and were often alone with little social interaction. His idea was to create a society that would unite female dermatologists and together help each other in the achievement of personal and professional success.<sup>4</sup>

In Brazil, women began to gain ground in the 1970s, where the first dermatologists became part of the boards of the Brazilian Society of Dermatology. In 1990, Dr. Orcanda Andrade was the first woman to be appointed as president of the society. In subsequent years, other women also occupied the same position, namely: Drs. Sarita Martins, Clarisse Zaitz, Alice Alchorne, Bogdana Kadunc and Denise Steiner (current president). In the Brazilian Society of Dermatology, women make up more than 65% of the associates today.

Today, women are openly recognized for their true value to the specialty and hold important positions in different areas of both medicine and dermatology. noteworthy the accomplishments by women in medicine are increasingly gaining recognition and respect.<sup>8</sup> They are professors, speakers, presidents of medical societies and conferences, writers and researchers.

Women have proven themselves equals in terms of the manual skill, finesse and the three-dimensional spatial ability necessary for dermatology, making them capable and competent dermatologists. The history of women in medicine and dermatology is marked by numerous challenges. Gradually, however, determination and skill have led them to stake a claim and stand out in a world that has been traditionally, masculine. □

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## MAILING ADDRESS:

*Katlein França*  
1475 N.W 12 st  
zip 33131  
Miami, Fl  
E-mail: k.franca@med.miami.edu

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